

Assorted Anecdotes

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Assorted Anecdotes

In my previous two pamphlets (137 & 138) I recounted a number of anecdotes related to my grassroots experiences. At the request of some community associates I have added a few more in this follow-up pamphlet.

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1

A remarkable encounter

In 1968 a friend and I were in a pub in a Protestant working-class area of Belfast, engaged in earnest political debate with two articulate young males about the same age as ourselves. Although they were pro-Union and anti-Republican, nevertheless they lambasted the way Unionist politicians manipulated the Protestant working class, and said that if they lived in England they would probably vote Labour.

Then, in the middle of our discussion, one of the two gathered together four beer mats, and placed one [A] on the table in front of us . . .

[A]

“This is where you would like us to be: working jointly with the Catholic working class, for socialism and social change.”

He then placed a second beer mat [B] a short distance from the first.

“And this is where we are at present.”

[A]

[B]

He then turned to me:

“Where have *you* come from?”

“*Come* from?”

“In your politics? You told us you were brought up in a non-sectarian household, and that your relatives were trade unionists and socialists. You probably haven’t had to travel all that far in your politics.”

When I nodded agreement, he placed the third beer mat [C] down.

[A] [C]

[B]

He then said: “Do you know where *we* [he and his friend] have come from?”

He then placed the final beer mat [D] on the table.

[A] [C]

[B]

[D]

“So even though we are nowhere near where you would like us to be, we have *still moved further than you*.”

I was stunned by the clarity of his analysis. A few years later, horrified by the wanton bloodletting on all sides, and partly motivated by similar grassroots encounters, I came to realise that I shouldn’t be fixated on an end point – I should focus instead on *creating a process* which could help take people *towards* that end point. Hence, when I subsequently initiated my Think Tank/pamphlet series, my determination was to utilise the Think Tank discussions to not only facilitate a *process* of dialogue and debate, but, additionally, to have the resulting pamphlets

act as a vehicle whereby that debate could be taken to a much wider grassroots audience.

[To date, 202,500 copies of the 138 different pamphlet titles produced have been widely distributed at a community level.]

Postscript: Not many months subsequent to that encounter inter-communal conflict soon escalated to the extent that engaging in such a discussion in that same Protestant working-class pub would have been highly unwise, and potentially dangerous.

2

Bloody Friday

During the Second World War my father had been a 2nd Radio Officer in the Merchant Navy. He was in the convoy to Malta (Operation Harpoon) which took place in June 1942, a few months before the more famous Operation Pedestal convoy (August 1942). His ship, the *Burdwan*, was sunk and, after having to leap off it on to a second ship, he arrived in Valetta harbour, Malta, wearing only shorts. [When his wages were later sent through to my grandmother in Belfast, she found that the supply of a new set of clothes had been deducted from his pay!]

Anyway, my father remained a ‘ham’ radio enthusiast with his own call sign, and our household always had an assortment of powerful radio receivers and scanners. I can remember the excitement, as a young boy, when he helped me build a ‘crystal set’, and when he taught me rudimentary morse code. As the Troubles intensified he often kept his radios in operation simultaneously. Some were tuned to local radio stations, but, if my memory serves me correctly, he had even managed to tune in to some of the emergency services. My family members were instructed never to tell anyone about this, so we assumed that it was possibly illegal. We lived at the bottom of the Lisburn Road close to the top of Sandy Row. It was a tall house, and from the top bedroom we could see partially over the skyline of central Belfast.

On Friday 21 July 1972, the IRA exploded twenty bombs across Belfast in the space of eighty minutes, resulting in nine people being killed and 130 people injured, some of them horribly mutilated.

Well, once we heard the first explosion we rushed to the top-floor room to see a cloud of smoke hanging over the rooftops. To our horror this explosion was soon followed by the sound of another and then another, and palls of smoke seemed to hang everywhere.

My father immediately turned on all his radios and went from one to the other trying to hear what was happening. And some of the communications being

voiced were horrifying. (Indeed, the whole of Northern Ireland was soon to be horrified when images of bloodied body parts being shovelled into plastic bags were shown on television.) My father decided that my younger siblings shouldn't be hearing any of this and he sent them out of the rooms where the radios were located. But the impact of that day stayed with us for a very long time.

[On another occasion, when paramilitaries from near-by Sandy Row were making it obvious that they were 'taking note' of those households in the surrounding area which hadn't put up Union flags, my father was adamant that he wanted nothing to do with any such trappings, and somehow managed to obtain a 'Red Duster' – the Merchant Navy ensign – and hoisted it instead. Again, we were never sure whether this was a completely unauthorised use of the ensign but up it went anyway, as our symbol of defiance.]

3

“Spying for Greece”

I have mentioned elsewhere in my pamphlets how, in 1973, I wrote a booklet which not only criticised the divisive legacy of Unionism, but also the IRA and its escalating campaign of violence. Within weeks, after I had distributed copies around various grassroots groups, a message was passed to me by a friend who had contact with the Provisionals: “Tell your mate that if he writes anything like that again, he'll get his knees ventilated.” Around the same time I was confronted near my house by Loyalists and received similar threats. Partly because of all this, and also because my wife-to-be was from a Catholic background, we decided it prudent to leave Northern Ireland and so we ended up living and working in Amsterdam. With the money we saved there, we then headed off on a year-and-a-half of travels across Asia to Australia and then Japan, returning via the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Our initial hope was that we could leave Northern Ireland and its Troubles far behind. However, not long into our journey, while we were travelling through a remote part of eastern Turkey and inadvertently walked too close to an army base, we were arrested by the Turkish Army, on “suspicion of spying for Greece”. During four hours of detention we were interrogated by a succession of army officers. When one of these officers was scrutinising our passports, he remarked:

“Ah, you are from Belfast! Tell me this: are you Catholic or Protestant?”

So much for escaping Northern Ireland!

[See also *Remembering the Hippie Trail: travelling through Asia 1976–1978*, Michael Hall, Island Publications, 2007, available from Amazon, eBay or myself.]

4

The Grianán of Aileach

A few years after the Troubles erupted and showed no signs of abating – and with the violence regularly highlighted around the world – a number of organisations in Europe and America initiated children’s holiday schemes in an effort to provide summer getaways for children from interface areas, partly to remove the children from their fraught environments, but also – given that most of these holiday ventures were ‘cross-community’ in ethos and practice – to give them the opportunity to meet children from the ‘other’ community, in the hope that there might be a positive long-term impact on attitudes and perceptions.

One such organisation was the Dutch group Pax Christi Kinderhulp [Child Help]. After an initial few years of sporadic involvement they made contact with the NSPCC, where I was a social worker, and decided to engage solely through us.

[Pax Christi Kinderhulp (PCK) would prove to be one of the most enduring of the outside organisations which had been motivated to get involved in Northern Ireland. Indeed, soon after I left NSPCC the Dutch also asked me to help initiate a major project, whereby they purchased a large house with extensive gardens in the seaside village of Killough, County Down, to be used as a cross-community residential facility (Kinder Community House), and for which I acted as voluntary co-ordinator for five years. And, as of 2024, PCK are still involved in providing support to community-based initiatives here.]

Every year PCK would take 120 of the children on NSPCC caseloads to Holland, where they stayed – in pairs – with Dutch host-families during the summer holidays.

Three or four of the Dutch organisers would come over each Easter to prepare for the summer scheme. During their visits I would take them to various places around Northern Ireland: on one occasion a walk into the Mourne Mountains along the Ott Track, on another occasion a visit to Nendrum Monastic Site on Strangford Lough, and even up to the rocky promontory just below the main cave on Cave Hill. Indeed, prior to departing from Holland the visitors were often told: “You are advised to bring good walking shoes, as we’re not sure where Michael will be taking us this time!” Of course, we also took them to traditional music sessions in Downpatrick, and visited the Crown Liquor Saloon in Belfast, so it wasn’t all *too* energetic.

NSPCC’s own group meetings were rotated between its two main offices – in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry – and it so happened that on one Dutch visit the

meeting was to be held in the latter. On arrival there the Dutch wondered where I might be taking them on this occasion.

I squeezed them into my car and we headed off to the border with the Republic. At the British Army checkpoint the car was signalled to pull over beside some army personnel. One of the soldiers asked to see what ID we had, and looked a bit perplexed as he perused the Dutch passports.

“Where are you all going?” he asked.

“I’m talking these Dutch visitors on a short trip across the border,” I replied.

“I can see that,” he said, “but *where* across the border are you going?”

“I’m taking them to see the Grianán of Aileach.”

“The *what?*”

“The Grianán of Aileach.”

“Look, mate, I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about. Why don’t you just tell me where you’re going!”

I was just about to explain to him when another soldier, sitting at a nearby table and seemingly engaged in paperwork, looked up, and called over to his comrade:

“It’s an ancient stone hill-fort just a few miles away. It used to be a royal seat of the O’Neills. There are fantastic views from it.”

The soldier questioning us looked at his companion, then back at us, shrugged his shoulders, and waved us on.

That British Army soldier clearly knew more about Ireland’s ancient heritage than many of its own inhabitants. (I was left wondering whether he had just read up about the Grianán or had managed to make a surreptitious visit to it while off-duty.)

5

“Are you okay?”

On another occasion I was driving a carload of my Dutch visitors along a dark and narrow country road. We had been to a traditional music session at a pub deep in the countryside and it was late before we had decided to head back to Belfast. Then suddenly, in front of me, the swinging arc of a red lamp indicated that we weren’t the only ones on this silent, lonely road.

I pulled to a halt and a UDR soldier inspected my driving licence. He then peered closely inside the car, in which my Dutch visitors, all of them quite well-built, were squeezed tight.

“Can I ask you to step out and come to the rear of your vehicle?”

“No problem.”

As I was getting out, one of the Dutch whispered anxiously:

“What do you think’s the matter?”

“Oh, probably wants me to open the boot for an inspection.”

When I proceeded to the rear of the car I was about to open the boot when the soldier indicated not to bother.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I just wanted to know: are you okay? Those passengers of yours seem a hefty lot.”

When I explained they were Dutch visitors, he said:

“That’s okay, sir, you can get back into the car. I was just checking that you and your vehicle hadn’t been hijacked by a bunch of paramilitaries.”

6

A meeting by the Wall

The Dutch were always eager to meet, during their Easter planning visits, the young leaders who would accompany the various groups of children each summer. However, those usually selected as possible leaders were invariably students on social work or related courses, who couldn’t totally commit themselves until examination results were in. And so, when the Dutch organisers would come to Northern Ireland to prepare and plan for the summer scheme, this aspect would still be a blank part of their agenda, much to their disappointment.

However, one particular year a youth worker proved so keen to go to Holland that he made a firm commitment as early as January. The Dutch were delighted by this and asked if he could meet with their organising group that Easter. However, luck was still against the Dutch, for this individual informed me that unfortunately he would be taking a group of young people on a camping trip on the very days the Dutch would be in Northern Ireland.

Anyway, the planning visit proceeded as normal, and, as part of the programme, I included a walk into the heart of the Mourne Mountains. On the road running through the Mournes, from Bryansford to Attical, just before it nears Spelga Dam, there is a small parking area at the beginning of the Ott Track. A not-too-strenuous walk, partly along the track and then across soft, peaty terrain, leads directly up to the Mourne Wall at a point where a stile allows this imposing structure to be easily climbed. Once over the Wall a much shorter walk provides access to the beautiful inner sanctum of the Mournes, with the rambler being rewarded by the sight of shimmering Lough Shannagh with broody Doan towering to its left.

Although the weather forecast had given no hint of anything to be mindful of other than a possible light drizzle, we were all nearing the Wall when we were suddenly caught by a heavy downpour. Some of my visitors tried to make light of it, saying, “At least we’re experiencing a little of that ‘Irish mist’ we heard about.” To which I responded, “I appreciate you trying to make me feel better about this, but even the Irish would call this ‘pissing down rain!’ ”

As we hurried over to the Wall and endeavoured to gain whatever protection it afforded I became aware of a small group of hikers approaching us, who, like ourselves, were staying close to the Wall for protection against the driving rain. As they neared I stared at them absent-mindedly, then in disbelief, and finally I began to smile to myself. The Dutch leader, Adri Verweij, noticing this, raised his eyebrows questioningly, but it was soon his turn to look amazed as I led him out to greet the person in charge of the group of young hikers, saying, “Adri, can I introduce you to our first confirmed leader for this summer.”

It did not surprise me that some of the Dutch found it difficult to believe that the meeting had been entirely coincidental!

7

An unforeseen ‘problem’

One year I accompanied the NSPCC children to Holland as overall co-ordinator, and was accommodated in turn at each of the four towns selected to host children that year. I was able to see for myself the tireless and generous effort the Dutch host-parents and organising committees put into their respective local programmes. These committees embraced people from all walks of life and combined many different skills, but their efforts were all directed towards one goal – to make the children’s experience as enjoyable and as memorable as possible.

However, as was only to be expected, there were quite a few hiccups along the way, most of which were due to misunderstandings rather than anything serious. Such as the tendency for the Northern Irish children to vacate the dining table and dash to the armchairs nearest the TV as soon as they had finishing eating. To the Dutch, whose families normally sat together at the dinner table until everyone had finished their meal, this was something of a culture shock. Even worse: some of the children would take their *still-to-be-finished* meals with them, and continue eating with the dinner-plates balanced on their knees!

But some of the ‘problems’ brought to my attention pointed to the deeper, almost poignant realities of some of the children’s lives. On one occasion I was

asked to visit a home where the host-parents had been expressing concern about one of their two young guests, who had each been given a bedroom of their own. As I sat in the living room talking to the host-parents they told me that this young girl seemed to be hiding away in her room, and didn't appear all that eager to sit with them downstairs. This was upsetting them, and although they thought the world of this child, for her sake they were willing to release her to one of the standby host-parents if, for whatever reason, she wasn't really happy staying with them.

As I climbed the stairs to the girl's room, I must admit that my social-work-trained mind was working overtime. Had anything happened between this child and the family, I wondered? Had there been some misunderstood physical contact (for the Dutch were often more physically demonstrative than the Northern Irish)? Or worse – had there been any *inappropriate* physical contact? I entered the bedroom and sat down opposite the girl. I asked her how things were going, and whether there was anything she was unhappy about.

“No, it's great,” she replied, “I really like it here.”

Feeling somewhat confused, I probed deeper.

“What do you think of the family?”

“They're really nice. They're very friendly. They don't shout at you or nothin'. And they don't make you eat anything if you don't like it. And they told me I can go to the fridge and take orange juice any time I want.”

“But has anyone said anything, or done anything, which you maybe didn't like?”

This time it was the child's turn to look confused.

“No. Why? Do they not like me?”

“No, no – nothing like that! In fact, they're extremely fond of you. It's just that they're wondering why you seem to want to spend so much time in your room.”

The girl looked at me in surprise. She was silent a moment before speaking again.

“I really love this room. I've never ever had a bedroom all to myself before. At home I have to share my bed with my wee sister, and my older sister sleeps on another bed. And all their stuff is always all over the place.”

She got up from the edge of the bed and walked over to a chair beside the window.

“This is the first time I have ever had a room of my own – and I just love being in it. And sometimes I sit here: come over and look out. See their lovely garden down there . . . when I look out my bedroom window at home all there is is a bit of rough ground outside the back of our house – and it's always covered in broken glass.”

Trying to contain the tears welling in my eyes I joined the young girl and together

we contemplated the peacefulness of the garden below. She finally looked at me.

“I *will* come down and sit with them more . . .”

“Yes, I think that would be nice for you all. But when I tell them just how much this room means to you, I’m sure they’ll also be happy for you to be in it as often as you like.”

After explanations had been made to the greatly relieved host-parents, I left feeling confident that they would all make the most out of their summer experience.

8

The risks of seeking out faith healers

My uncle used to suffer from extremely debilitating migraine headaches. Indeed, so painful were they that the firm he worked for – Mackies Engineering Foundry – would frequently arrange for a taxi to take him home. Now, it so happened that my partner, Sheila, who came from Killowen (in the Rostrevor area), by chance heard of someone living close to Mayobridge who had gained a good reputation as a ‘faith healer’. My uncle, who was, like myself, a life-long sceptic regarding religious matters, was nevertheless experiencing so much pain from his migraines that his attitude was: “Oh well, I’ll try anything.”

So, late one afternoon we drove him to Mayobridge. The instructions we had been given were far from precise: “Drive out of Mayobridge for about a mile and a half; you will see an old caravan in a field; there will be a horse (or a donkey) in the field.” Now, despite its small size, Mayobridge is at the epicentre of a profusion of roads: the Newry Road, Bavan Road, Old Road, Hilltown Road, Ballyvally Road, and Chapel Hill. We took a guess on one of these and commenced our search. After a couple of miles with no sign of ‘the field’, we headed back into Mayobridge and tried another road. Once again, after two miles we still had not struck lucky, so back into Mayobridge we went and tried a third road, but still with no success. On our fourth attempt, however, trying the first road again, we finally came upon ‘the field’, and my uncle walked over to the caravan, where its sole occupant greeted him in a welcoming manner.

Once inside, the faith healer put their hands gently on his head and held them there for some minutes, while incanting prayers. Then the healer give my uncle a small leaflet containing Catholic prayers and told him to recite them before going to bed.

“I’m not actually a Catholic. . .” my uncle started to say.

“Oh, never worry about that,” was the response, “they’ll work for anybody.”

And so we drove back to Belfast, our scepticism still undiminished.

“Ah, well,” said my uncle, “I can’t imagine anything will come of all that, but at least we had an interesting time!”

Sheila and I had a ground-floor flat in Fitzroy Avenue, in the Ormeau Road/University area. The very next morning I had just got up to make breakfast when there was the sound of brakes as two British Army vehicles screeched to a halt outside our windows. Soldiers leapt out of the rear of the vehicles, their boots resonating nosily on the pavement. Once out, the soldiers stood with their guns at the ready.

Just then there was a hammering on the front door. When I opened it there stood, not a British Army soldier, but an RUC constable. It was only then that I noticed that an RUC tender was also positioned close by. The constable pointed to Sheila’s green Morris Mini which was parked outside the house.

“That car is registered to someone living at this address.”

“Yes, it’s my girlfriend’s.”

“Right, tell me: where was your girlfriend’s car yesterday afternoon?”

“Ah . . . we were in the Mayobridge area. But what . . .”

“And what were you doing there?”

And so I told the story, with the constable looking ever more disbelieving.

“Right, I will have to check this out. Just stand there until I come back. And do *not* move away!”

By now Sheila had joined me and we stood waiting for the constable, who had disappeared inside the police tender, to return. When he did so his countenance was thankfully a bit more relaxed.

“Okay, I phoned through to the Duty Sergeant at Newry [RUC station], and he had indeed heard something about a ‘faith healer’ in that area.”

“That’s a relief. But what was the reason for your visit?” I asked.

“We had a report that a suspected Loyalist murder squad was driving around Mayobridge looking for a target.”

“What!”

“Well, we have to check these things out. But just one more thing . . .”

We waited for whatever he was going to say.

“The Duty Sergeant at Newry said to ask you, that if the faith healer *does* cure your uncle’s headaches, would you let him know, as he suffers from terrible back trouble.”

We were left speechless as they all returned to their vehicles and departed.

By the way, the visit did *not* alleviate my uncle’s migraine headaches.

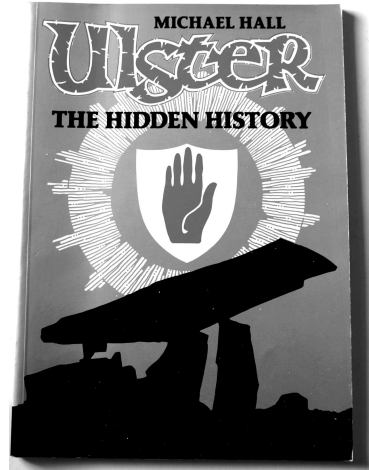
9

“All I need to do is stand my ground and argue.”

In 1986 I had written a book *Ulster: the Hidden History*, published by my close friend and community-work associate Dr. Ian Adamson, who had established his own publishing concern, Pretani Press. The book was designed to be accessible to a general readership, with over half of its 80 pages containing photographs and artwork, many in full colour.

The book was an attempt to reveal the *shared* historical and cultural inheritance of the peoples of Ulster. In an effort to see how this history resonated across the communities, prior to publication I had given draft copies to significant people on both sides of the ‘divide’, including Martin McGuinness, who told me that, while he hadn’t had time to finish it, he had no problems with what he had read of it.

Ian generously allowed copies to be given to interested community organisations, including prisoner support groups who in turn sent them into the prisons. It generated much positive feedback, but one response in particular took me by surprise . . .



I happened to be in the large Protestant working-class housing estate of Rathcoole, where I was part of the Rathcoole Self-Help Group, when an individual approached me and quietly asked if he could speak to me – privately. I was intrigued, so we went somewhere out of the earshot of others and sat ourselves down. What he then began to relate was quite unexpected.

“I am in the UVF, and for years now I have hated the IRA with a vengeance. There’s no end to their campaign of bombing and killing, much of it directed at the Protestant community. To my mind the IRA just want me, and everyone they consider ‘Brits’, pushed out of this country. And anyway, according to them the Prods are all ‘Planters’, who have no right to be in the country in the first place. But I decided: well, if they persist in trying to exterminate *my* community, I will just fight fire with fire, and do my best to exterminate *them* in return, because we can’t just allow Republicans to drive us into the sea.”

He paused for a moment, and then continued:

“And then I read your book. It was a total revelation to me. As I went through it I realised that all this shit about my community not belonging in this country was just that – shit! My community had the same right to be here as the nationalist community. Your book convinced me that *both* communities have an *equal* right to be here. But the main thing I got out of it – on a personal level – is that . . .”

He took a glance around before proceeding.

“. . . in defending my community from Irish Republican attempts to kick us out of the country we were born in, I no longer feel the same urge to retaliate by fighting, or even killing. All I really need to do is stand my ground and *argue* with Republicans instead, now that I feel I can do so on an equal footing with them.”

It was a very unexpected conversation, but nevertheless a gratifying one. The pen, I mused to myself after he had departed, can indeed prove mightier than the sword.

10

Worthy of a knighthood?

Of course, working at cross-community endeavours while the violence was still ongoing posed its own risks. Shankill Road community activist, Jackie Hewitt, realised right at the very start of the Troubles that cross-community networking was vital if communities were to lift themselves out of the ongoing nightmare:

We began to see a wider picture, and we began to associate with people from the ‘other’ community. And, really, that seemed a very natural thing to do – although you were always worried in case you would end up getting your windows broke because you were talking to Catholics.

A similar antagonism was evident on the Catholic ‘side’, although it sometimes originated from unexpected sources. As republican socialist and staunch advocate of radical community-based initiatives, Jim McCorry, noted:

I had been arguing within the Republican movement that we needed to listen to people from the Protestant tradition: we needed to be hearing what they were saying, we needed to be beginning a debate with them. *An Phoblacht/Republican News* came out with a front-page article – which I later learned had either been written or strongly influenced by a particular lecturer from Queen’s University – which more or less attacked my stance and what I was doing, at a grassroots level, with people from the Protestant community.

[Both quotations taken from Island Pamphlet No. 72, *Grassroots Leadership* (3)]

These risks were also highlighted to me personally when Sammy Duddy, an articulate and progressive-minded UDA spokesperson, once said to me (without any intended malice, but rather with his usual mischievous humour):

“Mike, see all this effort you put into going back and forth between Loyalists and Republicans? Well, I reckon you could get a knighthood for it. Now, I’m not sure *what* ‘night’, but you could certainly end up with a hood alright.”

Much as I liked Sammy, I’m not sure I appreciated his humour on this occasion!

11

Billy Giles

Billy Giles was a UVF member who had been involved in the murder of a Catholic man, for which he was sentenced to 15 years. The Catholic man had been known to him and Billy never got over the killing. He later told a journalist:

The target was the same age as myself ... a workmate and a friend. When it happened it felt like somebody had just put their hand down in through my head and just ripped the insides out of me. I was empty, I felt empty. You hear a bang and it’s too late. It’s too late then. You’ve went somewhere you’ve never been before and it’s not a very nice place and you can’t stop it, it’s too late then. I never felt a whole person again. I lost something that day I don’t think I’ll ever get back.

I first met Billy at EPIC (Ex-Prisoner’s Interpretative Centre) on the Woodvale Road, in the Shankill area. He knew I worked with both Loyalists and Republicans, endeavouring to get them to engage in debate and dialogue, and was very supportive of such work. During most of our conversations I could tell that his past weighed very heavily on him. However, during one particular visit, near the end of September 1998, our conversation never really developed. When I tried to talk to him he seemed completely distant, almost as if he wasn’t there – I found it an extremely unnerving experience. No matter how I tried to develop the conversation he seemed completely detached, as if his mind was somewhere else entirely. I was so perturbed that when I exited the building I spoke to the worker sitting near the entrance door, saying: “I’m really worried about Billy. I think somebody should keep a close eye on him over the next few days.”

Billy hung himself that Friday.

In his suicide note he wrote: “I’ve decided to bring this to an end now. I’m tired. Please let our next generation live normal lives, tell them of our mistakes and admit to them our regrets.”

12

Ex-prisoners in the Europa

During my many years of community engagement I have encountered, and worked with, a wide spectrum of individuals, from all communities and all backgrounds. Among these individuals there have been a select number who came across spontaneously as pure of heart and generous of spirit. One such was Anne Gallagher.

Anne, whose family name was McGlinchey, came from Bellaghy, and four brothers had been imprisoned for their involvement in the conflict. One of them, Dominic, also became Northern Ireland's most wanted man as leader of the INLA (and was eventually to be murdered by unknown gunmen).

Anne herself was totally conflicted by the violence going on all around. She worked in the Royal Victoria Hospital. She had been trained in infectious diseases, and, as a staff nurse in neurosurgery, she nursed policemen, soldiers, civilians, paramilitaries . . . all sides of the conflict. As she told me: "At visiting times especially I was always taken by the tears of the patients and the relatives at the bedside, and I used to think: my God, the same tears, the same grief! And I was thrown into this terrible anguish."

Out of that anguish Anne resolved to do something about it. One of her brothers had spoken about his liking for, and indeed respect for, a Loyalist prisoner, Martin Snodden, who he had met while incarcerated. Anne, discovering that Martin was now working for an ex-prisoner support organisation on Belfast's Woodvale Road, decided to make her way over there, and ask to speak to him.

[By this time, following a serious car crash, Anne had had to give up her nursing career, but was resolved nevertheless to use her time purposefully and productively.]

When she did get to meet him, and announced that she was Dominic McGlinchey's sister, there was a brief moment of surprise, but it wasn't long before Anne's genuine sincerity was met with an equally genuine response from Martin.

That engagement was the first of many which Anne undertook, and eventually a project was created, called 'Seeds of Hope', which embraced individuals who had been members of each of the main paramilitary organisations: IRA, INLA, UDA, UVF. Anne, who now lived in Dublin, would travel to Belfast by train and make her way to the Europa Hotel (once renowned as the 'most bombed hotel in the world' after having suffered 36 bomb attacks during the Troubles). She would

wait in the foyer of the hotel for other members of the group to assemble before they all headed off for a discussion elsewhere.

One day, as she was sitting by herself, the hotel manager approached her.

“I hope you don’t think I am being intrusive, but I have seen you waiting here on a number of occasions, and a couple of the people who you meet I recognise from seeing them being interviewed on TV programmes. So forgive me, I am just curious . . .”

“No, that’s understandable,” responded Anne, and she proceeded to tell him about the project and their search for reconciliation.

“That’s really fascinating,” replied the manager. “When you all head off from here, where do you hold your meetings?”

“Oh, there are a couple of organisations based in the city centre who sometimes give us access to a room.”

“Why don’t you hold your meetings here, in the hotel?”

“Well, we don’t have any funding so we can’t actually afford to *hire* a room, and certainly not in here.”

“That’s not a problem! I am really impressed by the work you are doing. You can have a room here for your meetings, free of charge, at any time. And I will arrange for refreshments to be sent up as well.”

Around this time Anne had come across some of my Island Pamphlets and was impressed by the way they allowed people to give genuine voice to their lived experiences, and had asked me to facilitate a pamphlet for her ‘Seeds of Hope’ group.

At some of the discussions which were held in the Europa only three or four members of the group were able to be present, but rather than postpone any meeting I always suggested that the discussion proceed. And it was with remarkable results, which reinforced for me that it is only when people find themselves in small, supportive gatherings – as opposed to large, impersonal public debates – that the recounting of highly formative life experiences, and indeed genuine soul-searching, can be encouraged to emerge.

[Island Pamphlet No. 27, *Seeds of Hope*, is available for free download on the University of Ulster’s website (<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/islandpublications>). It has also been included in my compilation volume *Island Pamphlets (Selection 1)*, available on Amazon, eBay or from myself.]

Sadly, Anne Gallagher died in 2013.

13

“Oh, it’s just the dolmen you’re looking for, then?”

Ireland is extremely rich in antiquities – dolmens, court cairns, passage graves, stone circles, standing stones, Ogham stones, ring-forts, earthworks, crannogs, round towers, high crosses, churches, monasteries, abbeys and castles. My family and I have explored many of these, in all parts of the island.

Sometimes when I have foreign visitors over, particularly those who have come with an interest in our inter-communal conflict, I often take them to visit not only a few of my favourite scenic locations but, if possible, some of these antiquities – even if only to the Giant’s Ring on the outskirts of Belfast. I do so for the following reason (which I had penned, at Ian Adamson’s request, for inclusion in his book *Dalaradia*):

I always felt it was important to provide the visitors, even in a small way, with a ‘sense of place’; to help them experience the very real presence our landscape exudes; even to get a feel for the way some localities seem to be infused with the Past. My hope was that it would also provide them with a deeper insight into the intensity both communities here bring to their seemingly immutable quarrel. For our conflict is in many ways territorial, between two communities who each feel the same passionate belonging to this land, and yet who feel threatened by what they perceive as the other’s exclusive claims over it.

In this instance my visitors were staying at Kinder Community House, the cross-community residential facility I had helped establish in Killough, County Down, just along the coast from Ardglass. I decided to take some of them to visit the Legananny Dolmen, which I consider (closely followed by the Kilclooney Dolmen in County Donegal) probably the most graceful megalithic structure in Ireland.

Now, whenever my family and I had visited this dolmen we had always made our approach from the north, via Ballynahinch and Dromara. But on this occasion I was approaching, for the first time, from the south via Castlewellan. Unusually for me, I got lost; I was probably chatting too much with my visitors. I had been telling them that some Stone Age remnants were such an integral part of the natural environment that many people in rural communities rarely accorded them any special attention. My carload of visitors seemed a bit sceptical at this.

Anyway, I saw two men deep in conversation leaning against a farmyard gate, and I stopped beside them.

“Excuse me, but I’m looking for the Legananny Dolmen, and I must have missed the road.”

“*Where* are you going?”

“To the dolmen.”

“Right. Yes, you’ve missed a turn back there. Go back to the crossroads and take the . . . sorry, *where* is it you are going?”

“To the dolmen.”

“Yes, you said that. But *whose house* are you looking for?”

“No-one’s. We just going to the dolmen.”

“Oh, it’s just the dolmen you’re looking for, then.”

And so he gave us directions, we retraced our steps and finally, in the words of a modern sat-nav, we ‘reached our destination’.

But although my visitors were suitably impressed by the dolmen, they couldn’t stop thinking about our previous conversation.

“You were right, Michael, that farmer thought you were using the dolmen simply as a point of reference. And yet it is an amazing structure in its own right.”

[A few years later, when the NI Tourist Board eventually got around to properly promoting our rich assortment of antiquities, the Legananny Dolmen finally came into its own, and is now featured on many a tourist brochure and publicity poster.]



14

How grassroots action can transform long-held attitudes

Many citizens of Northern Ireland have long since come to accept that our assorted political leaders, of whatever variety, are not in any urgency to build *genuine* reconciliation between our communities. They may pay lip-service to it, but most of them are still engaged in securing the tribal votes which they have used to sustain their positions for so long. However, at the grassroots, especially within working-class communities, individuals and groups *have* over the years repeatedly sought to build bridges and move this society forward. I once confronted one of our politicians with this fact, and his response was: “Huh! Show me one example where community actions have really transformed attitudes here!” Well, I intend to describe here a prime example of just how grassroots-led initiatives can effect remarkable change.

Farset is an interface project which has been highly innovative in its efforts to promote purposeful community-based initiatives. [*An account of Farset’s many projects is more fully described in Island Pamphlet No 90, which is also one of the pamphlets included in my compilation volume, Island Pamphlets: Selection 1*]. One of Farset’s initiatives was to take our young people – both Protestant and Catholic – away from their home environments via a youth exchange scheme. The first trip, in 1983, was funded by the British Council and as part of the programme the young people were taken to Paris where they visited the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe and other tourist sites. However, on the last day of the trip Farset’s manager, Jackie Hewitt, realised that they would arrive at the ferry port far too early, and he asked Farset’s secretary, Dr Ian Adamson, for any ideas. Ian suggested that they make a detour to the Ulster Tower at Thiepval, on the Somme battlefield.

[The Ulster Tower was erected in 1921 by public subscription raised in Northern Ireland in memory of the officers and men of the 36th (Ulster) Division, and all Ulstermen, who died in the Great War. It stands on the site of some of the most desperate fighting which took place during the first day of the Battle of the Somme.]

The group arrived at the Tower to find it locked up. A notice on the door gave the address of a local woman who would open it for visitors on request. At the young people’s insistence this woman was located and she duly opened the Tower. The interior was full of spiders and cobwebs, dust was lying thick on the floor and dead flies were everywhere. The young people seemed fascinated, and when they also visited a nearby cemetery they were soon engrossed walking around the headstones,

identifying the different Irish regiments. It was clear to Jackie and Ian that this part of their visit had meant more to the young people than the tourist sights of Paris.

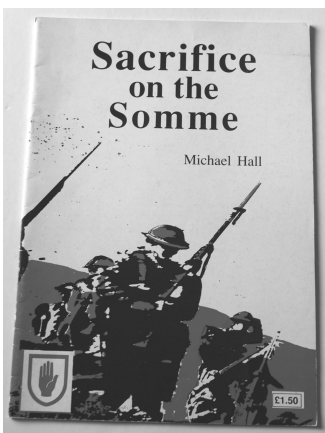
However, on returning home, nothing more was thought about it – until two of the young girls who had been on the trip came to see Jackie. “Jackie, see that Tower place? Can we not clean it up and get it opened again?”

Jackie was more than willing to agree, with the result that a Farset Somme Project was initiated, which, because its purpose was to refurbish the Tower, open it up to visitors, and reinstate it as a place of remembrance, managed to receive government funding. As the project developed it soon became clear the massive interest which had been generated. Alongside the ongoing renovation of the Tower, an extensive Farset programme now incorporated tours of the Somme area.

To give the young people involved in the Project some awareness of the historical context, Jackie handed me a copy of Cyril Falls’ *History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* and asked if I would compile a short booklet from it. Never one to turn down a cross-community opportunity I told Jackie I would, but on the condition that the booklet would not focus solely on the 36th (Ulster) Division but would be broader in scope. Jackie agreed, but, at a meeting some years later, he commented:

Michael Hall’s booklet *Sacrifice on the Somme*, commissioned by Farset in 1986, greatly helped to influence people to look at this whole part of our shared history in a new way. To be honest, I can remember reading through

the draft and feeling extremely uneasy: the contents mentioned not only the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions, but James Connolly, the Easter Rising, Partition and the Russian Revolution! At first I thought, as did others, that we wouldn’t get away with this. Then we decided: let’s put it out and see. And, although there were some negative comments, at a grassroots level the response was largely positive. That booklet, of which 5000 copies were eventually distributed, helped to consolidate Farset’s efforts to make the initiative all-inclusive.



The need to make the project all-inclusive stemmed from the fact that across Ireland attitudes to First World War remembrance were deeply divided. To most Irish Nationalists, whether in the Republic or in Northern Ireland – and especially

given that the year of the Battle of the Somme, 1916, was also the year of the Easter Rising – any Great War commemoration was largely viewed as the preserve of the Protestant Unionist population of Northern Ireland. Of course, both sides colluded in this perception. Many Protestant Ulstermen would have been loath to acknowledge the role played by Catholic Irishmen – even Catholic Ulstermen – in the Great War. History in Ireland had become – as it had always been – selective, exclusive and politicised.

In 1987 Farset’s ‘Somme Tour’ broadened out to include sites in Belgium: Messines, Ypres, the Menin Gate and the 16th (Irish) memorial at Wyteschaete. That year also saw the start of official ceremonies to which Farset invited dignitaries and local councillors from across Northern Ireland. Then, on 1 July 1989, Farset held an official re-dedication ceremony at the Tower in the presence of Princess Alice, the Duchess of Gloucester.

When the suggestion was made to purchase Thiepval Wood, which had been the 36th Division’s base prior to the battle, it required the setting up of a separate company, the Somme Association. In 1994 the Association opened a visitors’ centre at Thiepval, and also the Somme Heritage Centre, a registered museum located at Conlig, near Newtownards, County Down. [In 2004, with government assistance, the Association would finally purchase Thiepval Wood.]



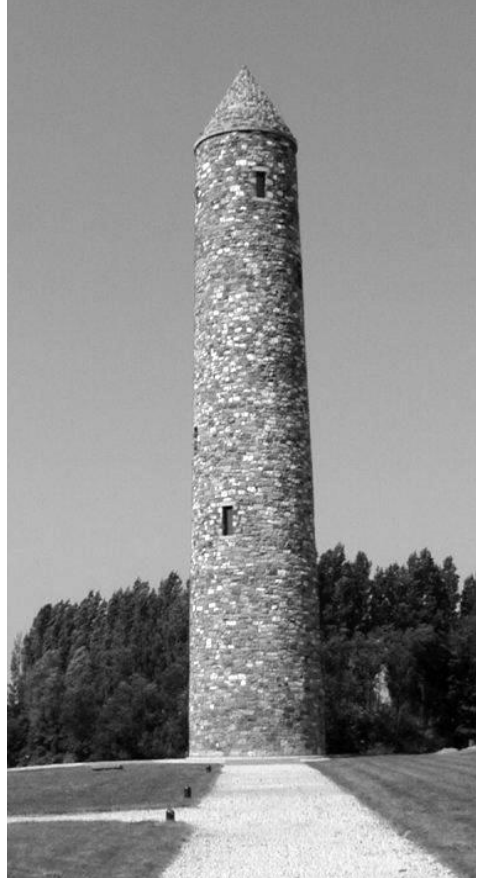
The Ulster Tower at Thiepval

With public interest now aroused by the work initiated by Farset, and carried on by the Somme Association, other people began to add to its impact. One important development was when Loyalist community leader Glen Barr – who had been enthused by his participation on a Farset Somme tour – joined with Southern TD Paddy Harte to establish the ‘Island of Ireland Peace Park’, located at Messines in Belgium, with a replica of an Irish round tower being erected as its central focus.

[The Battle of Messines took place on 7 June 1917. This was the first completely successful single operation on the British front. But there was another important ingredient to it. As H.E.D. Harris pointed out: “It is also memorable to Irishmen as largely an all-Irish achievement; two of the three divisions in the attacking line were Irish, the 36th on the right and the 16th in the centre of IX Corps, a unique line-up of Irish fighting men, and the largest in modern history.”]

The Peace Park was formally opened on 11 November 1998 by the Irish President Mary McAleese, in the presence of Queen Elizabeth and King Albert of Belgium, the first time an Irish head of state and a British monarch had participated in a joint ceremony. In her remarks President McAleese said:

Today’s ceremony at the Peace Park was not just another journey down a well-travelled path. For much of the past eighty years the very idea of such a ceremony would probably have been unthinkable. Today we are keenly aware that if we are to build the culture of consensus promised by the Good Friday Agreement then we need to create mutually respectful space for differing traditions, differing loyalties. I do not think that it is too bold to suggest that this day has been a day of historic significance.



The Peace Park was also to impact strongly on ‘P.J.’ Hallinan from Inishowen, County Donegal. He and others now formed the Inishowen Partnership Friends of Messines, and decided to hold a service of commemoration at Dunree Military Fort for all those from Inishowen who had died in the Great War. As ‘P. J.’ noted:

For our first commemoration we had prominent people, including Orangemen, from the Shankill up in Dunree doing their bit for our remembrance service. To me that was extremely significant. Maybe the day will come when we might share our commemorations – even all parade to the Field [on 12 July]. It happened in Belgium, when the AOH [Ancient Order of Hibernians] and the Apprentice Boys of Derry paraded, not in separate groups but mingling through each other, to the round tower. And they came back with ties exchanged; indeed, you wouldn’t have known who was an AOH man or an Apprentice Boy. Now, if it happened there, there’s no reason why it couldn’t eventually happen here. The precedent has been set. It’s about breaking down the old myths.

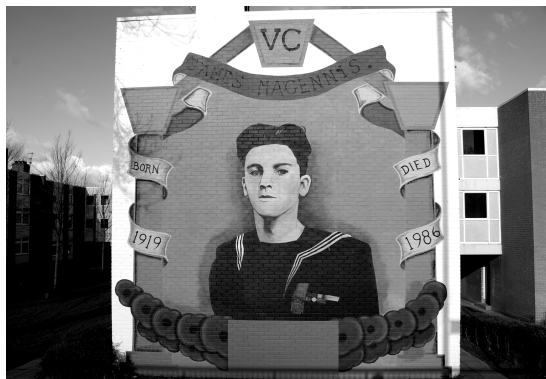
‘P.J.’ even did the unthinkable: when people from Messines came over to Northern Ireland for a visit, the Irish Tricolour and the Union Jack were paraded *together* around the cenotaph in Derry, the first time this had ever been done.

The Island of Ireland Peace Park had been initiated by ‘A Journey of Reconciliation Trust’, a broad-based, cross-border body bringing together people of all religious and political aspirations in Ireland. To complement the Peace Park and extend its purpose, an International School for Peace Studies was established in 2000 in Messines, in collaboration with local people. The school began to hold workshops and courses on peace-related themes.

Then in 2002 the Fellowship of Messines Association was formally constituted, the core of its membership being ex-combatants, both Loyalist and Republican. Not only did the members of this initiative engage together at the School for Peace Studies in Messines, but efforts were made in Northern Ireland itself to change perceptions at a community level. As Loyalist Frankie Gallagher recalled:

When we replaced a Loyalist paramilitary mural in Tullycarnet [East Belfast] with one depicting the only Northern Ireland recipient of the VC during World War II – James Magennis, a Catholic from the Falls Road – we initially thought we were going to get a lot of criticism and were quite anxious as to what the local response would be. We needn’t have worried, because the people of Tullycarnet made it abundantly clear that it was a great thing to recognise someone like that. And when we brought people

from the Irish Republic, and representatives of the Dublin Fusiliers and others, up to the unveiling ceremony, I was really pleased at how welcome the residents of Tullycarnet made them feel. I think they saw it as an opportunity to express something positive and non-sectarian about themselves, because they were sick of being stigmatised as bigots, and a lot of people in the Protestant community aren't like that at all.



And when Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern addressed a joint session of the Houses of Parliament in May 2007, he spoke of the World War 1 experience as an example of our “shared journey”.

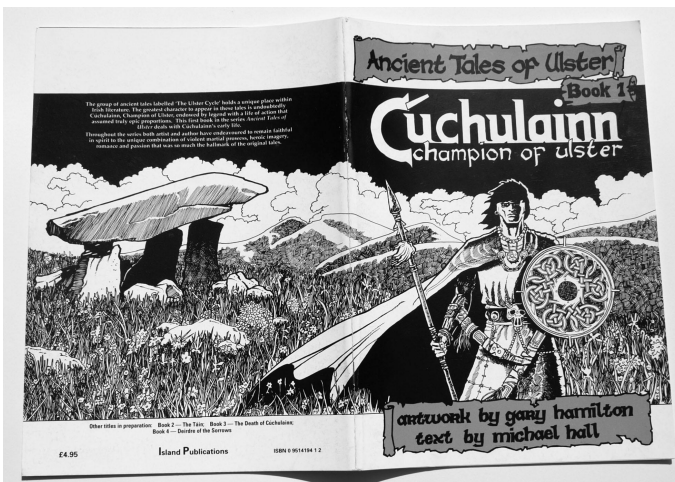
On 7 June 2007 the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Messines was celebrated there, and, as a further sign of changing attitudes, Sinn Féin sent its first official representatives (although individual Sinn Féin members, like Tom Hartley and Alex Maskey, had previously supported Farset's efforts).

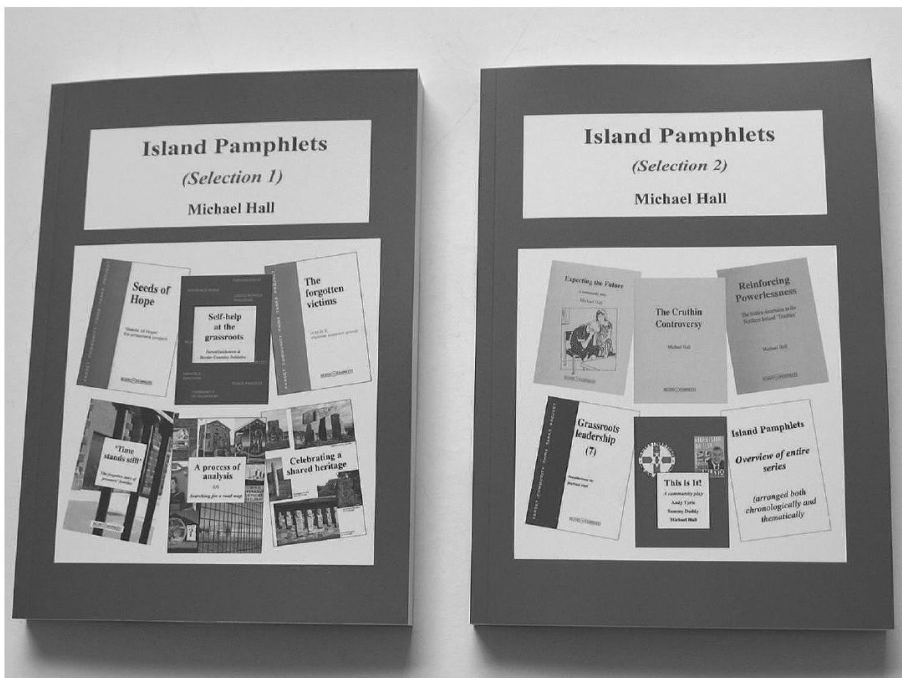
I will leave the final word with Jackie Hewitt (who sadly died in August 2024):

People forget the painstaking path which had to be trodden to change former perceptions and attitudes. I think that, when you look at all that has been done – from the first Farset involvement, the development of the Somme Association, and right up to what is happening now in Inishowen and out at the Somme and Messines – it was a marvellous feat and one of the most significant elements in the development of a peace process. Because the peace process is not the outcome of a couple of days at Leeds Castle or a couple of days away at a hotel somewhere by a group of politicians. The peace process is a manifestation of what has gone on in the community over the years, what the community has been saying, what they have been doing, what they're sick of, where they want to get to . . . So all these things contributed to the peace process. And I genuinely believe that what we have all done, through our different projects, has been a valuable part of that.

Yes, yet another dolmen!

In anecdote no. 13, I made reference to my second-favourite dolmen in Ireland: at Kilclooney, County Donegal. I have added a photo of it here. Also, when I produced a graphic novel on the Cúchulainn saga in 1989, I got the artist, Gary Hamilton, to add its image to the cover. I had also asked Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick to incorporate it into his cover for my *Ulster: the Hidden History* (see image on page 14).





Contents of Selection 1

- Pamphlet no. 27 **Seeds of Hope** *A joint exploration by Republican and Loyalist ex-prisoners*
 Pamphlet no. 39 **The forgotten victims** *Victims relate the impact of a loved one's murder*
 Pamphlet no. 90 **Self-help at the grassroots** *Examples of innovative community activism*
 Pamphlet no. 95 **'Time stands still'** *The untold story of prisoners' families*
 Pamphlet no.109 **A process of analysis** *An attempt to engender a conflict resolution process*
 Pamphlet no.112 **Celebrating a Shared Heritage** *Essays on our common inheritance*

Contents of Selection 2

- Pamphlet no. 05 **Expecting the Future** *A community play focusing on the legacy of violence*
 Pamphlet no. 07 **The Cruthin Controversy** *A response to academic misrepresentation*
 Pamphlet no. 14 **Reinforcing Powerlessness** *Curtailing the voices of ordinary people*
 Pamphlet no. 78 **Grassroots leadership (7)** *Recollections by Michael Hall*
 Pamphlet no.134 **This is it!** *A community play exploring Loyalism*

Supplementary Material:

- 1: Creating a vehicle for debate**
- 2: The Think Tank Process**
- 3: The pamphlets listed chronologically and thematically**

Both books are available as a set (£16.00) from Ebay or directly from myself.