

Community Recollections

plus
‘Burntollet’

Michael Hall

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mikehall.island@yahoo.co.uk
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Other community-related recollections can be found in:

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| Pamphlet no. 59 | <i>Home and Away (children's holiday schemes)</i> |
| Pamphlet no. 117 | <i>History of Belfast Anarchist & Libertarian Groups</i> |
| Pamphlet no. 137 | <i>Grassroots Experiences</i> |
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And also in my book *Island Pamphlets (Selection 2)*

Community recollections

The People's Democracy contained within its core membership socialists, republicans, Trotskyists, anarchists and others, mostly Left-leaning. Normally these political differences rarely, if ever, created more than mild internal dissension, especially as the generally antagonistic environment within which the PD was operating tended to throw all of us together.

However, at one particular PD meeting – I think it might have been in Armagh – a number of speakers began to praise Trotskyism. Those of us on the libertarian socialist fringe grew more and more irritated. For to us Trotsky was a gangster, no different from his brutal nemesis Stalin.

Finally John McGuffin could take no more. Rising to his feet he proclaimed: “The only time Trotsky ever saw daylight . . . was when a pickaxe came through his head!”

Well, as you can imagine, the response was explosive and angry, though thankfully it was hurriedly contained.

. . .

Many of the core PD members would meet every Saturday in Kelly's Cellars in Bank Street in central Belfast. A handful of us would also stand at the Royal Avenue end of Bank Street selling the PD's newspaper *Free Citizen*. This open plaza-type area was also frequented by other sellers, including an individual selling the *Protestant Telegraph* (founded in 1966 by Ian Paisley and Noel Doherty to serve as an organ for hardline Protestant fundamentalism, augmented by frequent tirades against the Catholic Church and moderate unionist politicians). The seller was never antagonistic towards us, but nevertheless no communication was ever entered into, even when we tried to initiate conversation.

Until one occasion when I happened to be selling the London-based anarchist weekly, *Freedom*. The *Protestant Telegraph* seller came up to me and closely perused the cover of my paper. He nodded and gave a slight smile.

“Anarchist, eh? I like anarchists.”

I was somewhat taken aback. Perhaps this individual wasn't as anti-progressive

as I had assumed. I felt that an opportunity was at last opening up for some meaningful dialogue.

“Oh, so you know a bit about anarchism?” I asked him.

“Anarchism? No, not really. I just like anarchists.”

By now I was feeling quite confused.

“*Why* do you like anarchists?”

“Because the anarchists burnt a lot of Catholic churches during the Spanish Civil War.”

My heart sank. So much for my raised hopes for a productive encounter!

• • •

Not long after Internment was introduced [August 1971] I went to London for a week, staying with some anarchist friends. We all took part in a mass demonstration which the English Left had organised to protest what was happening in Northern Ireland (and elsewhere). One of my comrade’s friends was a railway worker who had given him a handful of ‘railway detonators’ – small coin-sized explosive devices which railway workers would strap to the lines to provide a loud warning to an approaching driver that the line ahead had become blocked for some reason. [These have long since been dispensed with; today all warning systems are computerised.] Anyway, if the marchers found themselves halted by mounted police; or worse, if the horses charged at us – as they did during the Grosvenor Square riot of March 1968 – he intended to place these devices on the ground in advance of the approaching horses in the hope that the pressure of their hooves would set them off.

However, as the march proceeded one of my friends turned to me:

“Mike, I’m sure you are the focus of interest of two men walking alongside the march, and by the look of them they are plain-clothes peelers.”

I looked to where he indicated, and yes, two men, one on either side of the march, did seem to be staring in my direction.

“I can’t imagine it’s me they’re looking at. Why would they have an interest in me?”

But as we proceeded along the road, not only was it apparent that I was indeed the focus of their attention but they were slowly working their way through the mass of marchers and getting ever closer.

“Mike, if I were you I’d get offside pronto.”

As I made my retreat through the crowd I looked back at the two men, hoping that,

after all, they had someone else in mind, but no, they had made ever greater strides in my direction. I felt I had only one recourse – to make a quick run for it! Once I was clear of the march I glanced over my shoulder, and there were the two cops chasing after me. What followed next was a mad dash through the streets of central London. Thankfully, no-one sought to impede my passage, and finally, by running into a large department store but exiting through a different door I managed to shake off my pursuers. When I later got back to my friends' flat, they asked:

“What on earth was all that about?”

“Haven't a clue. God knows why they wanted me.”

I never did find out. [And the railway detonators were never put to the test.]

• • •

That short visit to London was memorable for another incident.

My friends took me out to a nearby pub on the evening before my return to Belfast. The interior was modest in size but the place was full, with customers sitting in small groups at separate tables. A singer was doing his best to entertain the gathering, although most table occupants were engaged in noisy conversation. Around the table closest to the singer sat three males, possibly in their late twenties. Shortly after our arrival we noticed that one of these males was mimicking the singer, at first not too loudly, but gradually more and more noticeably. His two companions were clearly endeavouring to get him to desist, but this seemed to encourage him, and his mimicking now grew louder and more obtrusive. And soon others in the room became aware of his antics.

At another table sat two males and two females. I could see that one of the females, clearly annoyed at what was transpiring, was gesturing to one of her male companions, but he shook his head, as if to say ‘I don't want to get involved here.’ However, the nuisance individual – I'll call him the idiot – had now got drunkenly to his feet and was doing his mimicking almost in the singer's face. All eyes on the room were now on him and one of his mates was trying to pull him back to his seat.

I said to my companions:

“There's going to be a big fight erupt very shortly.”

“No chance, Mike, this is not Belfast; we're not as mad as you lot. Things will settle down.”

“You think so? Do you want to bet on it?”

I glanced again at the mixed table. Both females was now urging their male friends to do something, so finally, but clearly reluctantly, one of them rose to his feet and went over to the idiot.

“Look, mate, why don’t you just sit down and stop annoying the singer?”

The idiot glared at this intervention, then – so quickly that I could hardly take his actions in – he grabbed an empty beer bottle from his table, and, holding it by the neck, with a quick upward swing, smashed the bottom of the bottle against the table edge, and then jabbed the broken edge into the other man’s face!

Within seconds the place erupted into a melee of people, some seeking to intervene, others to escape. My friends immediately pulled me towards the door, and when outside one of them said to me:

“Mike, when the police are called to this, they’ll be taking names, and when they find you’re from Belfast, they’ll be more interested in you than that crowd inside. So we need to scarper.”

As we made our way down the street, I couldn’t help commenting:

“So, this type of thing only happens in Belfast, then?”

“Oh, piss off!”

• • •

American Jerry Rubin, anti-war and counter-culture activist, was a co-founder of the Youth International Party (better known as the Yippies). In November 1970 he came to Belfast, seemingly to ‘give support to the Irish revolution’. I cannot remember whether his invite came directly from PD (and Belfast Anarchist Group) member John McGuffin, but McGuffin seemed to take a lot to do with the visit, and accompanied Rubin everywhere. Throughout Rubin’s short visit we had to move him around different locations as it had been announced that he was not welcome in the UK and we knew the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] would be searching for him.

To be honest, when I got chatting with Rubin, I wasn’t sure what to make of him. (And, to the surprise of many, in the 1980s he moved from being an American counter-culture Yippie icon to being a *Yuppie* capitalist.)

Around that same time I also met radical singer/songwriter and fellow Yippie Phil Ochs – I cannot recall if he had accompanied Rubin to Belfast or whether his visit was coincidental. But he sang and played guitar in McGuffin’s

Eglantine Avenue flat for over an hour, a very memorable occasion for all of us who were present.

When it was evident that Rubin's last 'hideaway' had been rumbled, he didn't actually seem to mind – maybe he had had enough of the 'Irish revolution'. As the RUC escorted Rubin to a waiting police vehicle – as far as I recall, there was no grand and dramatic 'storming of the hide-out' – the last thing he said to me was: "Could you make sure my [luggage] bag gets put into the cop car with me."

[In 1976 Phil Ochs committed suicide at the age of 35. In 1994 Jerry Rubin was hit by a motorist outside his Los Angeles apartment and died two weeks later.]

• • •

One of my most thought-provoking encounters occurred when I was in West Belfast just after a demonstration of some sort. We were standing around in a group when an elderly woman came out of her house and approached us:

"I know you young people, with your protests and all, believe you are trying to make things better in this country. But I have lived through trouble like this before and I don't think you young people realise what could come out of it all. Every form of protest in this country eventually leads to violence. And it also ends up bringing out the worst in some people, in *all* our communities. I really believe that you will all learn that lesson very soon."

I was left in very sober reflection after she had headed back to her house.

• • •

I was once walking through Belfast when I met a member of the PD (from which I had by then parted company, being totally disillusioned). This was a few days after a group called the Japanese Red Army had massacred 26 people during an attack at Lod airport near Tel Aviv (30 May 1972). The PD member was quite upset, saying:

"To link socialism with terrorism damages the socialist message."

I was somewhat taken aback at his reasoning.

"But what about the PD linking up with the Provisionals in the NRM [Northern Resistance Movement] and giving cover to IRA violence? Does that not amount to the same thing?"

"Oh, but that is quite different."

How blind some people can be!

People in Ireland, especially here in Northern Ireland, are often obsessed with identity-related issues. Indeed, even the phrase ‘Northern Ireland’ is uncomfortable for some, or even worse than just uncomfortable: to many the preferred designation is ‘The North’, or even ‘The Six Counties’.

But how do *outsiders* perceive our disparate identities? I have referred in another pamphlet to the period when my wife Sheila and I spent 19 months backpacking around Asia, and the occasion when we were detained by the Turkish Army ‘on suspicion of spying for Greece’. During our four hours of interrogation one of the army officers, while examining my passport, commented: “I see you are from Belfast. Tell me this: are you Catholic or Protestant?”

But one situation which I never recorded either in my pamphlets or even in the book I had written about our journey [*Remembering the Hippie Trail: travelling across Asia, 1976–1978*], partly because it was somewhat ludicrous, was nevertheless indicative of how others perceive the Irish identity.

After nine months travelling overland† we arrived in Perth, Australia, intending to find a few months’ work to replenish our finances before resuming our onward travels. Sheila got a job as a housemaid in Perth’s Sheraton Hotel, while I got a manual job in the Swan Brewery (named after the Swan River, along whose banks it was sited). The work was tedious and repetitive, so every 40 minutes you changed tasks: whether loading crates, watching used bottles pass before a bright screen to highlight cracks [any with cracks were thrown into a disposal bin], monitoring the clanking bottling lines, or, best of all, driving fork-lift trucks around the storage bays. After every third job change you were allowed to go for a cold beer. [Seemingly this was the source of some concern in Perth General Hospital, because of all the drink-related problems which came their way.]

Anyway, for the first two days I availed myself of the free beers, but, not really being a drinking person, I soon decided to forgo this perk. Then, some days later, as I sat in the canteen, a number of my young Australian co-workers came over to my table and sat down beside me.

† Our outward journey took us through Greece, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia. Our return journey was through New Zealand, Fiji, New Caledonia, Japan and the USSR (via the Trans-Siberian Railway).

“Mike, we were all talking about you, and we have decided that . . . that you are not really Irish.”

“Indeed? How did you come to that conclusion?”

“Well, because of three things . . .”

“*Three* things? What three things?”

“For a start, you have no religion.”

“That is correct.” (I had previously informed them that I was an atheist.)

“Secondly, you have no real national identity.”

(I had also told them that I didn’t limit myself to even a ‘Northern Irish’ identity, but preferred to see myself as a Citizen of the World.)

“Correct again. And what is the third reason?”

I didn’t really have to guess the last reason, nor I’m sure does the reader.

“Well . . . you don’t drink very much.”

“So, those are the three things you associate with Irishness?”

“More or less.”

Not all perceptions of Irishness fall into the category of negative caricatures. I once organised a week-long programme for a group of European social workers. At the end of their stay the group leader asked me if I could write up a report on the visit from my perspective, as well as provide background information on all the community groups with whom I had brought them into contact.

“That’s no problem,” I said. “I’ll get it to you next week.”

“Next week! Michael, if one of us was tasked to fulfil such a request, it would take us more than a couple of weeks to compile the report.”

I wasn’t sure how to reply to this, but others in the group intervened.

“Don’t worry, Michael will get it done in the time he says.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because he’s Irish. The Irish have always been renowned for their writing skills.”

Receiving such an accolade, I had to *make sure* that I had the report done within the time-scale I had promised!

. . .

I used to take minibus trips of young people on explorations of our local history and heritage. On one occasion, I was approached by a group of community workers who were sending six young people on a summer scheme to the United

States. The community workers didn't want these young people, if asked in the US about aspects of Irish or Ulster history, to only be able to talk about our inter-communal conflict – with its bombs, bullets and riots.

So I took these six young people – accompanied by six community workers – to the Giant's Ring outside Belfast, then Ballnoe Stone Circle, Inch Abbey and Struell Wells outside Downpatrick.

At the first stop – the Giant's Ring – when we all stopped at the megalithic dolmen in its centre, I gave the group a brief overview of the site's age (the construction of the raised earthen ring is reckoned to predate the Egyptian pyramids) and a few other basic details. As we were returning to the carpark one of the leaders, Joe Camplisson, whispered to me: "You're not giving them much information. Tell them more."

"Joe, I've done this before. You can see that the young boys, in particular, are looking bored, or pretending to look bored. If you lecture young people, you put them off. Just wait and see what happens."

So Joe, looking a bit disgruntled, kept his silence.

Later in the excursion, one of these young boys came over to me.

"Mister, see that stone grave we saw earlier, which you said was most likely a burial chamber: would they have buried weapons and treasure there as well?"

And his question was followed by more questions, and indeed questions began to come from the other young people. And the more they asked, the more I told them.

Finally, Joe whispered to me: "Okay, you were right on this one."

In fact, part of my approach was based on overhearing a Russian Intourist guide talk to her class of trainees when my wife and I had visited the interior of St Basil's Cathedral in Red Square, Moscow. She spoke to them in perfect English:

"Tourists only want to know so much; only need to know so much. While you're standing here extolling the virtues of our great artists, they're impatient to be getting into the next room. Most tourists have a shorter attention span than young children. Be concise. Give a good overview. Expand if you sense that the subject interests your audience. But if your audience looks restless, then you have said too much. Now – into the next room, and someone else can have a go."

It is hard to know how much information young people will take in, but with regard to that particular excursion, I got a pleasant surprise some years later.

I was walking along Belfast's Shankill Road when I was stopped by local community worker, Louis West, who had been one of the leaders that day. He had called me over:

"Mike, I have something to tell you."

"Go ahead, I'm all ears."

"Well, I was coming down the road the other day when a young man, wheeling a pram with an infant in it, and holding another child by the hand, said 'Hello Louis' to me. Now, I have worked with so many young people over the years, through youth clubs and what have you, that I can't always recall their names. He realised I wasn't sure of his name, so he identified himself and we had a good chat. Then, at one point he said: 'Remember years ago that big lad took us in a minibus around different places. And remember when we were at those 'eye wells' [Struell Wells include a dedicated Eye Well once used by pilgrims seeking healing for eye ailments] there was a busload of Japanese tourists in the car park.' "

I was immediately confused.

"Japanese tourists? I don't remember that, Louis."

At that time, because of the ongoing conflict, Northern Ireland was definitely not on the tourist trail. And certainly not for people coming from as far away as Japan . . .

And then, like a long-suppressed memory, I suddenly recalled the group of Asian visitors in the carpark, and a hazy memory came back to me of their coach driver telling me that they were staying in the Slieve Donard Hotel in Newcastle.

"Louis, that is absolutely amazing! That scene had literally vanished from my memory."

"Well," said Louis, "it certainly hadn't gone from his. Just shows you – you don't realise sometimes what young people are taking in, and what memories you are creating for them."

I do remember, however, on another occasion when I accompanied a group of young people to just below Belfast's Cavehill, and, pointing to the summit, I mentioned that that was where the Presbyterian leaders of the United Irishmen had gathered before swearing an oath to fight for Irish independence. One of the young Protestant youths quickly commented:

"A pity they hadn't all effin' fallen off!"

. . .

After it became clear that the Troubles were going to continue for some time, a number of charitable organisations – mostly from the US and Europe – began to facilitate summer holiday schemes involving children and young people from those areas most affected by the violence. I was involved in one major scheme, organised by the Dutch charity Pax Christi Kinderhulp [‘child help’].

From the very inception of this holiday scheme I quickly saw the adaptability of our children. On the hired coach taking some of the children – both Protestant and Catholic – to Belfast International Airport, when we passed any army patrol the Catholic children would sing the refrain “If you hate the British Army clap your hands!” I don’t recall what the Protestant children would sing, but they had their own refrains. As I sat with them I wondered how this was all going to pan out when they reached Holland. (I was accompanying the group as overall coordinator.)

But what a welcome surprise I got. Whenever a football game was being organised involving the Northern Irish children and the Dutch children, our children usually insisted on being on the *same side* against the Dutch – “us all versus Ajax” (Ajax Amsterdam being the top Dutch football team at that time). And that type of togetherness was retained throughout the three-week holiday. Of course, it could be said that they were doing so because they had all been thrown together into a strange environment, but it was a clear indication that if circumstances were right the so-called differences between our children could be overcome.

I have to admit though that later, on the return coach to Belfast, the different refrains resurfaced, but there was no obvious animosity. Indeed, those who had made friends ‘across the divide’ seemed to have really enjoyed each other’s company.

[More anecdotes about this Dutch exchange can be found in Island Pamphlet No. 59, *Home and Away*, and Island Pamphlet No. 139, *Assorted Anecdotes*]

One amusing anecdote, however, arose from a separate scheme which involved our children going to the US. One of the organisers told me that his American counterpart had expressed some concern about the children they had been sent.

“You told us that these children had been selected from socially deprived areas?”

“They were. They all came from disadvantaged areas. Why do you ask?”

“Well, some of the children told their host parents that they lived in ‘executive’ houses.”

And my friend then had to explain the difference between social housing estates

run by the Northern Ireland Housing ‘Executive’ and what Americans see as the up-market houses favoured by business executives!

• • •

For many years I was very friendly with radical Ballymurphy priest Father Des Wilson, and supported his work in Springhill Community House (his residence). He was always eager to bring different political parties and organisations into dialogue and debate with a group of local people, and on one occasion he asked me:

“Mike, some people here would really like to hear from the UDA [Ulster Defence Association, the largest Loyalist paramilitary organisation] what their proposals for an Independent Ulster really mean. Could you ask Andy [Tyrie] if he would delegate someone to come over here and make a presentation. Tell him we will guarantee their safety.”

And so I went to see Tyrie and passed on the request. His response:

“Mike, let’s be honest about this. Des says he could guarantee their safety, but it wouldn’t just be certain republicans in Ballymurphy I would be wary of – it would be journalists. If once they got wind of any UDA member going into Ballymurphy you can just imagine the story they would make of it. You and Des and I might think it was a positive thing to do, but a journalist would just sensationalise it; it would be presented in a very controversial light, and create more problems than it was worth. Anyway, even though you yourself don’t necessarily accept the idea of an Independent Ulster, you have a good grasp of what it’s all about, so I suggest you make the presentation on our behalf.”

Which is what I did.

• • •

On another occasion I wanted to bring Andy Tyrie and Father Wilson into what I tentatively called a ‘Cross-Community Think Tank’ (this was a few years before I eventually launched my Think Tanks/Island Pamphlets initiative). But as a precursor I thought I’d best bring them together for a one-to-one chat. Both were agreeable, but while I was wondering where might be the most suitable venue – i.e. somewhere private and secure – Tyrie was thinking ahead of me:

“Mike, you have a lot to learn about the media here. We cannot afford to be discovered meeting ‘privately’ or ‘secretly’. Journalists would just love to discover such a meeting having taken place. I suggest we meet in a *public* place, like a café

or a restaurant. If we were seen together in public a journalist might be surprised, but they couldn't make out that they had 'uncovered' a 'secret' meeting, which they would just love to claim."

And so, I brought the two of them together in the café/restaurant attached to a garden centre outside Belfast. And it never got into the papers!

[Note: That initial 'Cross-Community Think Tank' idea involving the pair never got off the ground.]

• • •

On one occasion a leading member of Sinn Féin came to my house; if I recall correctly I think he wanted me to prepare a document on current thinking within the Protestant working-class community. As we talked, and argued, in our living room, I suppose our discussion was very much at a overtly political level. And all the while my wife Sheila was in the kitchen, but could obviously hear our exchange.

Finally, after I criticised the IRA for its armed struggle, and my visitor countered that the republican movement had a constituency which supported that struggle, Sheila could take no more and came to the door of the living room:

"Let me tell you something: the war that the IRA is waging is *not* being done in my name!" (Sheila being from a Catholic background.)

And she said it with such passion and indeed anger that my visitor and I fell silent, and that was more or less the end of that particular discussion.

• • •

At times of severe tension, for example after yet another IRA atrocity, and in an effort to encourage Loyalists to refrain from an equally violent response, on a number of occasions I would prepare a 'discussion paper' in which I urged Loyalist leaders to call for no retaliation and for them to issue an appeal to both communities to pull back from the brink. I would take these papers to Joe English, a member of the UDA's Inner Council who I trusted, to distribute among his associates.

"I'll see what I can do, Mike, but the mood is really bad at present; I can't see anyone liking, let alone agreeing with, what you are proposing."

And the next time I would see Joe he would be despondent:

"I passed your paper around a few people, but, as I warned you, that last atrocity has really angered people."

However, on one occasion when I was leaving his house, he called out to me as I was going through his gate:

“Mike, you might not be getting anywhere with those papers of yours . . . but don’t stop bringing them in.”

• • •

Once when I was engaged in preparing a series of pamphlets to assist a ‘Conflict Transformation Initiative’ initiated by the Ulster Political Research Group [UPRG], I was handing a draft copy of the latest pamphlet in the series to Frankie Gallagher, one of the UPRG’s main spokespersons, when he said:

“I wonder what traps you have laid for us this time?”

I was shocked, even somewhat alarmed, by this statement, but Frankie gave a reassuring laugh:

“I have noticed that when you go away to work on any document, following a discussion with us on its contents, the resulting draft seems to contain wording that goes *a bit beyond* what we originally said, as if you are trying to slowly push us in a more progressive direction . . .”

When I didn’t deny his assertion, he laughed again:

“I personally don’t mind. You’re just right to try and push us a bit each time; we need to be constantly moving forward. And if anyone raises any complaints I’ll stand over what you’ve written.”

• • •

I have always tried to work ‘behind the scenes’, partly because I felt that the trust I had built up on all sides would be compromised if I became too vocal, too public. Indeed, I have always felt really irritated by those individuals, including a few clergymen, who present themselves as interlocutors and hold supposedly ‘private’ or even ‘secret’ meetings with paramilitaries only to appear eager to engage with the media soon afterwards.

Occasionally, I will act somewhat mischievously to any request to take part in some TV programme, such as when I got the following phone call:

“Hello Michael, we are doing a documentary about the situation here, but we heard that you don’t engage with the media?”

“You heard correctly.”

“Well, maybe the fact that we are doing *two* programmes might reassure you: one about the Protestant community, and one about the Catholic community . . .”

“Why don’t you people do *three* programmes?”

“Three?”

“Yes. One about the Protestant community, one about the Catholic community . . . and one about the rest of us.”

The caller fell silent, so I asked:

“Where are you staying?”

“The Botanic Lodge.” [*Formerly a guest house located at 87 Botanic Avenue.*]

“Right. Will you be there on Friday or Saturday night?”

“Yes, why?”

“Well, do yourselves a favour. Go down Botanic Avenue to Shaftesbury Square, and around the corner to Lavery’s Bar at closing time. And I’ll tell you what you’ll find outside. A crowd of young people milling around: some flirting, some throwing chips at one another, some pushing one another about in mock fights . . . But for that one moment they are like *any other crowd of young people* – in Berlin, New York, London, Moscow . . . wherever. But no, to you they have to be ‘Prods and Taigs’. You people in the media insist on putting us all into the rigid boxes you so desperately need for your programmes.”

Their request for an interview with me was unsuccessful.

However, having said all that, I have welcomed a regular stream of students, journalists and others into my home for one-to-one conversations.

On one such occasion – 11 August 1984 – the foreign journalist who interviewed me ended her interview with a request. The following day there was to be an anti-Internment rally to Andersonstown, and rumour had it that it would be addressed by American NORAIID spokesperson Martin Galvin. Galvin had been banned from entering the UK so it was assumed that if he was produced at the rally, the RUC would attempt to arrest him. So would I take her there?

The next day I drove her to the Falls Road, parked my car and we then proceeded on foot to Andy’town where the speeches were to be made. After five minutes studying the situation around the platform I told her we had to leave.

“But why? We have only just got here.”

“Take a look at that line of policemen.”

Although all the members of the RUC riot squad wore helmets with protective visors, you could still see their faces.

“Now take a look at that crowd of young men over there.”

She did so, then asked:

“What about them?”

“Can you not sense the barely-contained antagonism on those faces – on *both* sides. It is palpable. Someone is going to get killed shortly.”

“What!”

“Listen, just by looking at their faces, I can tell this is going to end very badly. Both sides are spoiling for a fight. I can’t take responsibility for us remaining here.”

As we returned to my car, the journalist hardly spoke, apart from one irritated comment:

“You people here are all so melodramatic!”

To try and mollify her I took her for a coffee and endeavoured to give her a broader overview of the situation here.

The following day she phoned me – to apologise for her remark of the day before.

“I obviously have a lot to learn about this place.”

Quite an understatement!

[A riot had indeed broken out, leaving four people seriously injured, twenty hurt and one man – John ‘Sean’ Downes – killed by a plastic bullet.]

. . .

When I was a member of the Rathcoole Self-Help Group, another member of the group and I brought a minibus load of young Loyalist males to Conway Mill on the Falls Road to see a series of political skits put on by members of Ballymurphy People’s Theatre. We actually arrived at the Mill after the performance had commenced and the skit then in progress had someone pretending to be Margaret Thatcher, standing at a lectern which was draped with a Union flag. Some of the young males afterwards told us they initially thought we had, for some reason, brought them to a Loyalist club! Anyway, they all really enjoyed the event and, indeed, much of the radical content also clearly resonated with them.

Soon afterwards I was talking to a journalist in my home and I relayed this

anecdote to him. He thought it was fascinating and said he would add it to an article he was writing. Alarmed, I had to make him desist.

“Why not?” he responded, “it’s a very interesting story.”

“Yes,” I said, “but there could be ramifications.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, for a start, the two of us didn’t make it public knowledge in Rathcoole what we were doing, and the local paramilitaries might not have been pleased with those local young people for attending such an event. They would be equally displeased with the two of us for having the effrontery to take young Rathcoole Loyalists up the Falls Road in the first place.”

The journalist was disappointed but agreed not to mention this anecdote, although I was surprised that he couldn’t foresee the likely problems himself. As for me, I learned to be more cautious in sharing anecdotes with certain people.

• • •

When I first initiated my Think Tank discussions and their associated pamphlets, I was always conscious that what I was engaged in could be easily misconstrued, or negatively impacted upon by misreporting. At one of the earliest discussions one of the participants arrived with a journalist in tow. I had not been aware he was going to bring this individual, for I would not have agreed to it, but I felt it would be rude to just turn round and exclude him.

As the discussion got under way, I was conscious that this journalist seemed overly busy scribbling in his notebook whenever the conversation became strident or argumentative. After the discussion was concluded I took him aside.

“I don’t mean to tell you how to write your articles, but it seemed to me that you were focusing on some of the more extreme comments which were made.”

“What if I was?”

“Look, when I bring people together, I allow them to freely express themselves. As you will have noted from the discussion, some of the comments made clearly reflected the hurt and anger experienced by some of the participants, but there were also other opinions expressed which were more accommodating. I do not censor any of the angry comments people make, but by explaining the context in which they were said, and by setting them alongside the other, less emotive contributions, the reader will be able to see that the discussion

embraced a wide range of opinions.”

“So what are you trying to say?”

“What I am trying to explain is that if the more aggressive comments were the *only* ones highlighted – or, alternatively, even the more accommodating ones – a reader might not gain an accurate understanding of the discussion *in its totality*. Not only that, but if your article – that is, if your intention is to produce one – was slanted towards the extreme viewpoints expressed, then not only might your readers come away with a false impression, but it could actually undermine the work I am engaged in, trying to bring people into purposeful dialogue. And, I should also point out, the final version of the pamphlet which I will produce from this discussion will contain only that which is collectively agreed by the participants. I repeat: only what is collectively agreed is put into the public domain; all drafts are then destroyed, and my tape is wiped clean.”

I could tell that he was angry with my comments, but he just shrugged his shoulders.

“I will keep all you have said in mind.”

I never saw him again. I don’t know if he ever wrote an article. If he did, there were no repercussions from it. But I made it clear at all future Think Tank discussions that journalists were not welcome (unless they had something relevant to contribute regarding the topic under discussion). They would be given the resultant pamphlet like everyone else, and it would be up to them to make of it what they wished.

• • •

There was a time when I was constantly shepherding individuals and groups around the community network. For example, Father Des Wilson might contact me:

“Mike, there’s a delegation of Irish-Americans over and we told them they should also meet people from the Protestant community. Could you take them around a few groups?”

Or Andy Tyrie would contact me and say:

“Mike, a few people have arrived over with Ulster-American connections, and I told them that they really needed to sit down with both sides to this conflict. I told them they should meet some of those renegades up the Falls, and I know someone who could take them there. Would you do that for them?”

However, there were times when these visits were not only taking up quite a bit of my time, but, more importantly, I felt I was taking up a lot of the time of the community groups, and I was conscious too that these groups were often making space for these meetings as a favour to me. But was it really worthwhile?

And then one visitor changed my perception as to the value of such encounters.

A young girl arrived over – I cannot recall her nationality or whether she was a student or a budding journalist. I took her around a few venues. At one encounter some Republicans tried to explain to her why they felt the IRA had no option but to engage in armed struggle. She listened patiently and then said:

“Okay, but I still can’t understand why you feel the need to *kill* people – soldiers or others – in the pursuit of your goals.”

“But the Brits have been oppressing us . . . ”

“Yes, but I’m asking you why you feel the need to *kill*? Have you not considered any alternatives which might be less counter-productive?”

And the republicans were somewhat flummoxed and waffled on again about British oppression – some of them even bringing in the ubiquitous ‘800 years’.

Then I took her to meet with Loyalists, and, without any prompting from me, she asked similar questions about their need to kill for *their* cause.

“Oh, we are trying to prevent a United Ireland.”

“But can you not put your energies into that without needing to *kill* people?”

This time, it was the loyalists who began to waffle evasively . . .

I realised that if it had been *me* arguing with these individuals – something which I did frequently – it would have remained on a political, historical level, with the usual ‘whatabouteries’ thrown in for good measure. But this young girl had stripped the situation down to its ethical core: *why do you need to kill other people to advance your cause? Surely there are always alternatives?*

I realised that outsiders can often ‘cut to the chase’ in a way which eludes *us*.

• • •

I was a good friend of writer Dervla Murphy (who died in 2022 at the age of 90). Dervla came from Lismore, County Waterford. She was a prolific author, with over two dozen books to her name, most of them accounts of her extensive world travels. Although on one occasion, when she was in my house, I told her that my favourite ‘*travel*’-themed book of hers was not one of these but the book (*Wheels Within Wheels: Autobiography*) which described her own *personal*

journey from devoting many years looking after her invalid mother to her eventual decision to cycle to India (which she later described in *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle*).

When I was preparing my own *Ulster: the Hidden History*, Dervla asked me to send her a copy so that she could review it. I did so . . . but there was no response. I felt this was very unlike Dervla, but I didn't want to chase her up, in case she was too busy with one of her own books. And then, quite some time later, a letter arrived from her to say that when my book had arrived at the post office in Lismore she had been away in Cameroon, West Africa, and so they had kept all her mail to one side. Unfortunately, they only discovered, months later, than my parcel had fallen behind a cupboard! However, as Dervla wrote in her letter: "Being decent folk, they didn't just throw it away at that point, but shamefacedly delivered it to me with many apologies."

Anyway, I was able to use a paragraph from her subsequent review for the back cover of the second edition of my book.

. . .

A friend of mine, Robert Bell, who worked in the Linen Hall Library, was researching a book on Ulster surnames (which was later published). Anyway, I was once walking along Donegal Square North close to the junction with Donegall Place. I heard someone call my name, and there, still a fair distance away, was Robert, who had just exited the library. Although there were quite a number of pedestrians between us, Robert had clearly something of interest to tell me which couldn't wait. So, much to the surprise of the intervening shoppers, he bellowed out:

"Mike, I have just discovered where your surname comes from! The Halls were cattle thieves from the Scottish borders!"

The looks I got from those around who heard this and could tell that I was the intended recipient were priceless!

I recently looked this up on the internet. An AI overview states: "The 'Hall' surname is associated with Border Reivers, a historical group of raiders and cattle thieves active along the Anglo-Scottish border. . . . The Halls were a prominent family, often referred to as a riding clan, known for their involvement in raids and cattle rustling. Like other reiver clans, their primary loyalty was to the family name rather than the English or Scottish crowns." So there you are!

In October 2004 the Taliban took hostage three UN election workers in Afghanistan. One of them was Annetta Flanigan from Richhill, County Armagh. The Taliban threatened to behead their hostages unless US and coalition forces withdrew from the country.

The year before, conflict resolution practitioner Joe Camplisson and I had worked with some Israeli and Palestinian activists on their own conflict. [I published two pamphlets (nos. 57 & 58) detailing the workshops we had organised for them in Belfast.] We thought we would see if our Palestinian contacts would write an appeal to the Taliban on the hostages' behalf. Joe phoned Hisham Abdel Raziq, President of the Palestinian Association of Prisoners, Gaza, a well-known activist who had himself served a lengthy time in Israeli jails. When Hisham answered the phone, he was immediately sympathetic, but there was a problem:

“Joe, I would certainly like to help you, but this office is closing in five minutes for the start of Ramadan.”

And then Hisham came up with an idea:

“I'll tell you what I'll do. I will send you a fax with our organisation's letter-heading on it, and I will sign the blank page at the bottom. Get Michael to write a letter on my behalf.”

And so a fax duly arrived, I wrote an appeal as if it was coming from Hisham and we had it sent to the British Embassy in Kabul, to be then passed to the kidnappers.

Joe and I also visited the Belfast Islamic Centre to see if they too would assist. The Iman was eager to do so. He asked if we had got any other letters of support. When we told him of Hisham's intervention he asked to see our copy of the letter. As he read through it I could see his face indicating some confusion. He then turned to us:

“I'm surprised that Hisham hasn't once quoted from the Quran in his letter.”

I realised then that I should at the very least have added something like: ‘In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful.’ So much for the limitations of my atheistic background: I had omitted to include anything religious!

After 27 days of captivity the UN hostages were freed when US and Afghan troops stormed a number of houses, detaining ten people. Claims of a ‘prisoner exchange’ deal were denied by the Afghan authorities.

Burntollet

Taken from my book

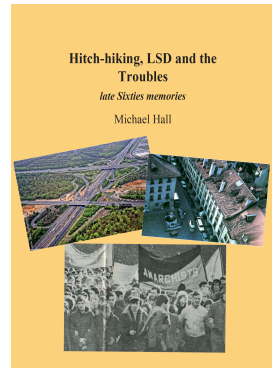
Hitch-hiking, LSD and the Troubles

Derry January 1969

The Ulsterbus driver refuses to take us along the main road to Derry. But, dammit, how are we going to rejoin the march? The three of us finally decide to get ahead of it and wait, so on reaching a likely place we get the driver to stop and we alight. I'm carrying two bare poles, with the Anarchist banner stuffed inside my jacket. We take a short lane leading down to the main road. To our consternation we see that, at Burntollet bridge just beyond us, a large crowd of men have gathered. What's this? Friend or foe? It is too late to retrace our steps so we continue towards their ranks feeling decidedly uneasy. Some of them watch us approach, eyeing us suspiciously. Others are busy building piles of stones at the side of the hedges. This is bad! If they turn on us, we won't stand a chance.

Some of the men advance aggressively towards us but luckily – for us that is – the blue PEOPLE'S DEMOCRACY banner appears in the distance as the marchers come into view. All interest in us is lost and with the men's attention diverted elsewhere we scurry to where a half-dozen police tenders lie parked. Joining some newsmen, I begin to sense an air of impending disaster. What's going to happen? That crowd near the bridge look pretty ugly, and are those men with armbands stewards? What do they want stewards for? Control? Or attack?

The marchers, tightly bunched together now, come almost abreast of the crowd of waiting men, hemmed in to one side of the road by a line of helmeted policemen carrying riot shields. Christ, turn back! It's a trap! Behind that hedge armed men are waiting for the signal to pounce! Turn back! Didn't the police tell you, warn



you! The figures in the field stoop now, almost to a man, picking up stones which some cradle in their arms, others hold ready in their hands. I feel my legs go weak, yet *we* are safe, we are in the police lines. I glance towards the nearest policeman. A look of complete disdain glares back at me. How safe is that?

I don't get time to find out for the air is suddenly rent with shouts and screams. We run forward. With a sickening feeling in my stomach I look towards the march. But I can't see it properly . . . it's hidden under a cloud . . . cloud? . . . it's not a cloud, it's a bombardment of rocks and stones! The attackers strike and I see the blue banner sway wildly from side to side and finally fall, its bearers pitched to the ground. Club-wielding men lash viciously into the marchers. But suddenly the police are running towards us. What's happening, are the attackers turning on the police as well? Pushing the newsmen before them, the police shove us back . . . further back. The police leap into their tenders. I stop running . . . What! . . . no-one's after us! What are the police doing? The tenders burst into life and move slowly forwards . . . but that's the wrong bloody direction! What about the marchers back there! What are you up to!

I pull myself up along the hedge and see the column stagger, now in total disarray. The unfortunate rear has been split off and its members chased into an adjoining field. Eventually the vanguard of the march comes abreast of us, wide-eyed and white-faced. A sizeable number of this first group are seemingly unconscious, cradled in the shaking arms of their comrades. Garbled accounts begin to emerge of some marchers being cornered in the ditches and viciously beaten with sticks. Of attackers sinking their boots into the unprotected stomachs of motionless victims. Of screaming girls being pushed into the river and then forced to dodge a barrage of stones and swinging clubs.

Dripping blood and nervous, the dishevelled column grows bigger. But nowhere as big as it was. Where are the others? Have some not escaped from the river yet? And what in Hell's name are the police doing? Why aren't they going to the marchers' assistance?

Individuals now stammer out stories to the excited journalists. Wounded are carried into the back of police tenders. Demanding voices and raised tempers fill the air. Were there no arrests? Seemingly not. Somehow the march comes together again and decides to proceed. They're too near Derry to turn back now. The marchers are silent now, lips pursed and sullen-faced. I attempt conversation but the heads only nod and shrink back into the blood-stained collars of their anoraks. Someone starts *The Internationale*. Any cameraman is greeted with a forest of clenched fists. A few people stare at us from their houses. Did they hear? No, it's too soon, we're just another march to them. We reach the outskirts of Derry and close our ranks tighter again. Our Anarchist banner and that of the Revolutionary Socialists are all that remain to flutter above our heads.

A murmur flows back through the lines. Another ambush is waiting in Irish Street! We move forwards faster now. Crash! A volley of stones disintegrates the ranks, everyone looking after him/herself. Our Anarchist banner is in front now. Better roll it up! Too late! From nowhere we are attacked. Hands pull at the poles . . . something smashes into my mouth. Joe drops his end of the banner to grapple with someone . . . I instinctively hold my pole horizontal, trying to fend off the shapes that lunge at me and tear at the banner. I finally lose my grip and the banner is gone . . . the momentum of running marchers carries us on . . . pushes us forward . . . stones continue to crash all around. Like fast-moving photographs the scene constantly changes . . . juddering into staccato glimpses . . . uncontrollable happenings . . . Watch your head! . . . run to the grass . . . my shoulder is hit . . . now my back . . . another stone smashes into my ankle . . . almost falling . . . Which way? . . . can't run properly . . . that one missed . . . that one didn't! . . . Look back, is that the banner burning? . . . no time . . . can't stop . . . over there . . . against that wall . . . hurry now . . . faster . . .

We finally reach what seems the safety of a row of houses but stones bounce off the rooftops to come crashing into the crowd, now vastly swollen by Derry people. I suddenly see a half-brick flying through the air. As if I am watching it

in slow motion I can predict where it will land, who it will strike down. Get out of the way! But I can't shout . . . I'm too late anyway, for the running figure in front of me receives a sickening thud and collapses, like a lifeless marionette, to the ground. Strong arms pick him up and we move forward again. I duck my head and raise my arm at anything that moves in the air – stones or birds. Pavlov never conditioned dogs this quickly!

Across Craigavon Bridge. There are hundreds now swamping the bridge heading for Guildhall Square. We pour in and fill it to capacity. A loudspeaker crackles, its electric throat coughing hoarsely. The speeches begin . . . demands are made, and bellowed into the air: 'Houses!' . . . 'Jobs!' . . . 'Working-class unity!' . . . 'Non-sectarianism!'

The crowd listens intently, all eyes converging on the platform lorry. Do they understand, or is it just the momentum they sense? Is the way forward really visible, the path to the future in sight – or is it just the old fears being paraded in new rags, voiced in new slogans? A girl beside me faints and we carry her away, past anxious-looking citizens and smirking policemen. Derry's Walls look down on us, their ancient cannon rusting in their obsolescence. Or are they really so obsolete? How can objects which can raise the cry of war again, pump the blood of revenge unto unreasoning veins, renew the rolling drums and fill the whistling pipes, be obsolete? Do the cannons not hide behind a contemptuous knowledge, that they, while only inanimate metal, yet have control over men, can dictate their lives, mould their actions and conceal their hearts? The loudspeakers still clamour, the crowd is getting restless, angry words are in the air, but we don't stay to the end, we are tired.

In small groups we are directed to make our way to a local hotel, where, in what is either a large banquet hall or conference room, soon filled to capacity with marchers, a hot meal is laid before us. I allow my eyes to travel around the room. It all seems weird, like some surrealistic dream. Like actors after the curtain falls, the backdrop has suddenly changed, the stage is being prepared for a different scene. Did the marchers come through four days of riot and ambush

to be pampered and rewarded like a Sunday-school gathering of children? Yet – I am hungry. But should we not be outside in the streets? Can we leave the people of Derry in the air? After all, how can they know what we were really marching for if we are tucked away in a hotel? If trouble breaks out tonight, as it is bound to, should we not be out there with them?

Rumours of barricades being erected filter into the conference room. But we're still arguing: someone wants to form a 'Red Guard'; someone wants to arrange the sleeping; someone wants volunteers to stay overnight with the squatters in the Guildhall; people give descriptions of their injuries at Burntollet Bridge; the press sit on the floor. The rumours persist – the police are going wild. The conference continues.

But when we finish, Derry is reported quiet. What will we do? Someone offers two of us a bed – "Hurry now, it's getting late." We are taken in a taxi through quiet streets. Not a soul to be seen, not a barricade. Strange, were the rumours wrong? We enter the house in the Creggan estate to see Jesus and Mary looking down at us from the walls. Hello, Jesus – your religion has a lot to answer for.

Our host bids us sit down. The inevitable questions begin.

"Tell me, were there any Protestants on the march?"

"A few. It depends on what you mean. Most of them, like ourselves, are really agnostics or atheists."

The couple look embarrassed, and I can just imagine their thoughts: 'We hold no grudge against Protestants . . . but *atheists*? Surely these two young men must believe in something?'

I wake cramped, my feet twisted to accommodate my legs on the sofa. I look down: my blankets have rolled off me during the night, but I must have been too sound asleep to notice. Outside, the day is visible through the curtains, and our hosts are already up, sizzling sounds and tantalising aromas coming from the kitchen. A child peeps round the doorway shyly, hugging a struggling ginger cat in his arms. With eyes wide open and one thumb stuck in his mouth, he retreats

a little as we sit up and rub our eyes.

“Mummy, they’re up,” the child cries as he disappears into the kitchen. The man of the house comes into the room.

“How did you sleep? Good. You didn’t hear the noise?”

“What noise?”

“The riot. There was fierce rioting last night.”

What! Rioting? Where?

“Oh, about half a mile away.”

And we didn’t hear a thing! We eat quickly and our host agrees to guide us back to the city centre.

“I can’t go all the way, I have to go to chapel . . . you understand.”

Of course we understand . . . or do we? The air outside is cold and to our surprise the city is hidden under a perfectly white blanket. So, riots and snow while we slept? The houses abruptly end and we come upon open ground. A burnt-out vehicle is lying on its side, the black underside of its chassis contrasting vividly with the surface snow. Those bumps in the melting snow at our feet must be stones. Hundreds of them lie everywhere and our shoes continuously crunch through the slush to shatter hidden pieces of glass. What happened? Were there many injured? Any dead? Who started it?

The homeward bus awaits, but is it not strange to bring revolt to a city and then depart by the next morning’s dawn?

