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Conrad Atkinson
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- Home
- This Week's PDF Editions
 - Andersonstown News Thursday
 - Festival Fever 2007 PDF
 - Property Guide
 - Business and Recruitment
- Top 50 Belfast
- Sign Up for Irelandclick Newsletter
- News
 - Headlines
 - Features
- Festival Fever
- Opinion
 - Letters
 - Your Texts

- [Editorial](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Squinternet](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Sport](#)
 - [GAA](#)
 - [Soccer](#)
 - [Boxing](#)
 - [Bowls](#)
 - [Darts](#)
 - [TeamTalk](#)
 - [Punter's Guide](#)
 - [Other](#)
- [Notices](#)
 - [Public Notices](#)
 - [Classifieds](#)
 - [Deaths](#)
 - [Memorials](#)
- [In The Community](#)
 - [Eye on the Past](#)
 - [Find It And Fix It](#)
- [BelfastPropertyOnline.com](#)
- [Business and Recruitment](#)
 - [News](#)
 - [Comment](#)
- [Aisling Awards](#)
- [Aisling Bursaries](#)

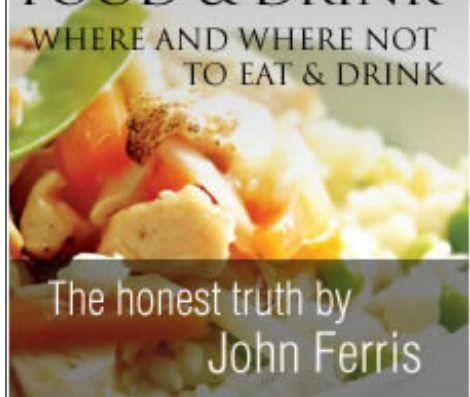
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Headlines

Belfast's forgotten Bloody Sunday

Damian McCarney

The daughter of one of 11 civilians murdered in Ballymurphy during the opening days of internment hopes that events to remember the victims of the massacre during this year's Féile will open a new path to truth.

"We want to raise awareness," said Briege Voyle, whose mother, Joan Connolly, was gunned down by the notorious Parachute Regiment on the first day of internment.

"We want to bring it out into the public that these were 11 innocent people. We know that we are not going to get any inquiries or apologies or anything, but we need for this to be known by the public and there are still some answers which need to be given."

On August 9, 1971, Joan, fearful for her two young daughters' safety in the volatile climate of the day, went in search of her children.

Earlier that day British soldiers had swooped on Ballymurphy as they had on nationalist areas throughout the North, lifting Catholics for indefinite periods and without any prospect of a fair trial.

Mother-of-eight Joan was sadly never to return home as she was shot by soldiers stationed at the Henry Taggart army base.

The tragic story of the murder of Joan Connolly 36 years ago is just one of the heartbreaking stories of death and loss. Some of the victims, like Joseph Corr, died after being drawn out of their homes by the commotion on the streets; others, such as Fr Hugh Mullan, died as they tried to tend to neighbours and friends injured in the heavy gunfire. Others again, such as John McKerr, died as they simply went about their daily lives.

Throughout the Ballymurphy families' grim stories familiar themes run: the innocence of the victims, the brutality of the deaths, the taunting by soldiers, the failure of the British criminal justice system to properly investigate let alone hold people to account for the atrocities, and the inability of families torn apart to properly come to terms with

the deaths.

Despite the numbers of casualties it is remarkable how few people have ever heard of the massacre which was a precursor to the infamous events of Bloody Sunday in which 14 people were to be murdered in Derry less than six months later.

"The same soldiers who carried out Bloody Sunday had earlier done the same thing to us," said Briege, who remains disappointed by how little media attention the Ballymurphy Massacre is given.

"We are completely wiped out of the story, nobody seems to recognise that we, the 11 families, are left."

Briege's point was further illustrated this week as local news was dominated by the ending of the British army's 38-year presence on the streets in the North. While many of their shameful atrocities were at least cursorily mentioned, the Ballymurphy Massacre was conspicuous by its absence.

Tore families apart

The relatives' campaign for truth was started by Relatives For Justice (RFJ) 10 years ago when they hosted an event called 'The Forgotten People' in which a handful of the bereaved families, who previously did not know each other, stood up and spoke of the traumatic events which turned their lives upside-down. Now RFJ are again helping the relatives of the Ballymurphy victims to highlight their stories with three events taking place next week.

On Tuesday at 2pm [not 3pm as stated in the Féile programme] an independent panel at St Mary's University College will, for the first time, listen to accounts by relatives of all of the victims of the massacre, in addition to accounts by survivors and eyewitnesses. The panel will include human rights campaigner Fr Des Wilson, Chairperson of RFJ Clara Reilly, Caroline Parkes of British Irish Rights Watch, a representative from the Committee on the Administration of Justice and one of the bereaved family members from Bloody Sunday.

There will also be a photographic exhibition at the same venue next week. Events will come to a close on Thursday with a commemorative Mass at Corpus Christi Church at 7pm.

Briege Voyle has high hopes that this programme of events might bring a new awareness and shed new light on exactly what took place during the massacre. In particular, the family of John Laverty are hoping that eyewitnesses will come along to the St Mary's event and be able to tell them where exactly he was killed by the Paras.

"The truth is the most important aspect to come out of these events," said Briege. "We are hoping that this will throw the whole thing wide open and we will see what happens. We hope that this is the start of something and will bring the truth out, because our story is as big as Bloody Sunday.

"If they had stopped and taken notice of what happened in Ballymurphy then maybe Bloody Sunday wouldn't have happened. But then they [the Parachute Regiment] came back to Belfast and did the same thing in Springhill in 1972."

08/03/2007

