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Victims of a 'war' not of their own making

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By Roy Garland

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The late Brendan Hughes, who initiated the first hunger strike and also brought it to an end, was worried that young people might get romantic notions of the terrible events that afflicted him.

He insisted that truth was very far from the romanticised versions and regarded himself as living proof because of the long term ill-effects on him from the time of the hunger strikes.

His thoughts are impressive for their honesty and give us a glimpse into his anguish.

On top of the physical pain Brendan believed Sinn Fein had betrayed its working class roots and republican principles.

While some former activists survived unscathed many suffered mental problems, depression, alcoholism and difficulties in relationship and jobs.

He told The Irish News that many

ex-prisoners were "still suffering in silence" and had not received sufficient support to adjust after release.

Some of his friends were brutalised, beaten and tortured and had their food deliberately defiled.

He insisted that not one hunger striker wanted to die but he felt a strong sense of personal responsibility because he had brought the first hunger strike to an end.

Before Sean McKenna entered into a coma he had asked him not to let him die and Brendan gave his word.

Although gravely ill himself, Brendan shouted "feed him" as he was taken away. Although he had carried out a promise this action troubled him because he thought, if one man had died perhaps 10 others might have lived.

I was reminded of the heartbreak of Billy Giles, a loyalist whose involvement followed IRA killings like those on Bloody Friday when 20 bombs were detonated killing nine people and leaving others horribly mutilated at Oxford Street Bus Station. Young policemen scraped remains of body parts from the street and placed them in plastic bags. Other killings followed but the final straw was the murder of a young woman outside a church hall in east Belfast.

Billy reacted impulsively becoming involved in killing a workmate. At that point his life changed forever.

He felt he could never repair the damage and in prison reflected deeply on this.

Yet despite having left school at 14 he achieved remarkable academic success and gave unstinted support to peace from prison.

On release he continued peace building but found he could not live with himself and tragically ended his own life leaving family and friends distraught.

But victims who were members of paramilitary groups are often denied victimhood status despite having been caught up in a "war" not of their own making.

Others who helped instigate the conflict could remain respected members of society. Yet many of those who engaged in violence often did so to defend communities under threat and had little time to reflect on what they

became engaged in.

It is surely best to view the conflict as a terrible tragedy that left victims in all walks of life. From this perspective we could mark the end of the conflict in a collective way. Instead of holding commemorations for 'martyrs' from one or other side, we should place all victims on a par, perhaps listing them together on a public granite memorial as permanent reminder that it must never happen again.

While it is perhaps true that we cannot equate members of the security services with paramilitaries – it is often a matter of chance, certainly on the loyalist side – whether a young person joined the security forces or the paramilitaries and in death all are equal. But some folks on the hill want separate commemorations.

Some Republicans want Mairead Farrell honoured and some Unionists want her killers – the SAS – honoured at the same venue.

Willie McCrea says he had wanted war declared so that the army would have put more Provos, "six feet under where they belong".

Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness said that after Bloody Sunday he would have killed every British soldier in Derry if this had been possible.

Such reactions in the midst of conflict are understandable but surely we can now see the Troubles for what they really were – a tragic episode whose causes lie in the mists of a turbulent past.

Most heroes only appear heroes because of our rose tinted spectacles.

Blame cannot legitimately be placed on any one shoulder and we can never agree on the full truth but, so far as in us lies, we must ensure that the tragedy never happens again.

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