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the blanket

A Journal of Protest and Dissent

We Must Deal Openly With The Past

David Adams • *Irish Times*, 13 April 2007

Speaking at an Easter commemoration rally last weekend, Martin McGuinness said republicans would use exclusively peaceful and democratic means to try to achieve their goal of a united Ireland.

This assurance was echoed by the leadership of the Provisional IRA in their customary Easter message. While both statements only confirmed what has long been a working assumption, such confirmation is nonetheless welcome. The words used are significant.

A commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic methods is much more binding than previous standard lines from republicans which simply declared the "war" to be over, or that the IRA would not be an impediment to political progress.

Implicit in the statements, as well, is an acknowledgment that the IRA had used violent and undemocratic means in the past in pursuit of a unitary Irish state (why else an undertaking not to do so in the future?). Now this hardly ranks as a startling revelation for those of us above a certain age, but it will come as something of a surprise to an awful lot of people too young to have any memory of the Troubles.

Thanks to a concerted attempt by various commentators and "historians" to rewrite history, many young people believe that the Provisional IRA's campaign was driven primarily, if not exclusively, by the lofty aim of winning basic civil rights for the Catholic population in Northern Ireland.

According to this new narrative, only when those rights had been secured did the IRA feel able to end its violence. Neatly avoided is any explanation why, if that was

There is no such thing as a dirty word. Nor is there a word so powerful, that it's going to send the listener to the lake of fire upon hearing it.
- Frank Zappa



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indeed the case, the IRA did not cease its activities in 1974.

By then the old Stormont regime had been closed down and virtually every demand of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association had been met, yet the IRA campaign continued for another 20-odd years.

The truth is the IRA used the wholly legitimate grievances of Northern Catholics as an excuse to embark on a violent campaign aimed at forcing Northern Ireland into a 32-county unitary state against the democratically expressed wishes of a majority of its people.

The IRA's campaign ended, not because it had achieved its primary goal but, rather, because it had signally failed to do so. Moreover, the violence had in fact become counter-productive.

Republican talk of an "equality agenda" only came very late in the day - long after it had been delivered by the SDLP - when, in order to get off the hook of conflict, it was decided to replace an unachievable objective with one that had already been secured. A carefully cultivated political mandate gave most republican activists a welcome exit route from a hopeless, self-perpetuating struggle that was going nowhere.

On the cusp of a bright shiny new future for Northern Ireland, the temptation is to ignore the revisionists and spare oneself the bother and the boredom of having to trample back and forth over old ground.

Except in the new historical narrative where republicans are idealistic battlers for the rights of the oppressed, unionists are conveniently cast as the villains of the piece and, for the most part, authors of their own misfortune.

The inference is that the conflict lasted only as long as unionists resisted delivering on an "equality agenda". This sidesteps the fact that from the time Stormont was closed in 1972 the unionists were powerless to deliver on anything. Any true account of the Troubles could only determine that unionism was far from blameless, particularly in regard to anti-Catholic discrimination.

But it was how unionists voted, not how they acted, that provoked the ire of physical force republicanism. Most of us in Ireland, whether Northerner or Southerner and irrespective of religious or political affiliation, are past masters at presenting "history" not as it was but as we would like it to have been. We are adept at the expunging of retrospective "non-conformists" from the tribal pantheon.

In this way, the Presbyterians of the United Irishmen have been almost completely erased from the collective memory of Northern Protestants because their beliefs and actions do not fit with contemporary political opinion.

We Must Deal Openly With The Past

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Likewise, until very recently in the Republic, the bravery and sacrifice of many thousands of Southern Irishmen in two World Wars was considered an embarrassment.

But it is the building of separate, partial histories by the two traditional tribes in Ireland that causes the real damage. Each tends towards a one-eyed view of the past that sees only the positive on one side and the negative on the other, and ignores the bits that do not suit particular prejudices. It is up to us whether this is indeed a bright new dawn or merely an interlude that is used to build up trouble for the future. If it is to be the former, then we need to dispense with our tendency towards monochrome history and deal honestly and openly with the past.

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