

From Grieving to Peace: The Cross-Community Response in the Aftermath of the Remembrance Day Bombing in Enniskillen

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the unexpected cross-community response in the aftermath of the 1987 Remembrance Day Bombing in Enniskillen. The terror attack executed by the I.R.A. killed 11 people, all civilians and Protestants, and injured more than 60, becoming one of the deadliest attacks in the history of the “Troubles”. It argues that this sense of community that urged following the attack was not circumstantial and it had been there even before the bombing. This research used as primary source local newspapers, diplomatic reports and oral history.*

Keywords: *Troubles, Northern Ireland, Enniskillen, Social History, Community.*

Northern reticence, the tight gag of place
And times: yes, yes. Of the “wee six” I sing
Where to be saved you only must save face
And whatever you say, you say nothing. –
Seamus Heaney, *North* (1975).

Introduction

The Good Friday Agreement is now twenty years old. Though it is yet not possible to say that sectarian violence has now disappeared in Northern Ireland, the peace treaty has brought to the country the opportunity to demonstrate the advantages of a civilian diplomacy. It is important to acknowledge that this settlement was only achieved by the effort of several layers of their society – from politicians to diplomats, religious leaders and businessmen, they were all responsible for the negotiations that led, in 1998, to the end of the “Troubles”. Notably, the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland is embedded with numerous attempts of a peace settlement. These agreements – some more successful than others – had in common the backchannel negotiations, that hit not only the high politics spheres but also saw heavily involved grassroots participation.

The Sunningdale Agreement in the 1970s, the Anglo-Irish Agreement in the 1980's, the cease-fires in the following decade, and finally, the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the St. Andrew's Agreement in 2006 were all results of this dynamic, notably intensified in the later years of the 1980's and throughout the entirety decade of the 1990's. Under those circumstances, one event in particular is considered as a turning point in the course of the "Troubles", especially for its implication in the civilian diplomacy in Northern Ireland. The Remembrance Day Bombing on the 8th of November 1987 exposed the complexity of this conflict, as well as the complexity of the relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities.

In the book *Making Sense of the Troubles*, David McVea and David McKittrick (2012) claims that the Enniskillen bombing was "clearly a grave setback for the Republican movement" (201). Especially because on the occasion, there was no one who could justify the measures of a terror attack that killed only civilians. They wrote:

Two themes flashed around the world in the wake of the bombing: one was that IRA had killed eleven Protestants civilians as they gathered on Remembrance Day; the second was the almost superhuman display of Christian charity and forgiveness shown by Gordon Wilson.

Altogether, the history that followed the Remembrance Day bombing was a culmination of numerous aspects that can be illustrated by the senator Gordon Wilson, the community-driven response and the balanced coverage of the local newspapers that helped to shape the image of Enniskillen as a forgiving community (Bolton 207) to the world. This conjuncture created by the tragedy also promoted the need for a peace settlement to end the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The sense of community in Enniskillen

Words have meanings: some words, however, also have a "feel". The word "community" is one of them. It feels good: whatever the word "community" may mean, it is good "to have a community", "to be in a community" (Bauman 2001.1). There is an agreement about this term that could be summarised in one simple equation: community is equal contentment. Though, this is etymologically correct to assume, it does not show the deepness of the debate around this very concept. For instance, in the wake of the Remembrance Day Bombing, the people of Enniskillen were often referred by the media as "a community", certainly, a strange concept to accept in a divided and conflicted society like the one in Northern Ireland. Even though, the word indeed felt to be fittingly in that case, and the cross-community response after the deadly attack was only a reflection of the everyday life.

During the Troubles, the two larger communities were still divided and praised their own preserved background as part of their identities. The Protestants would still

send their children to Portora Royal School, follow their Rugby team and participate in angling competitions during the summer. The Catholic community would enjoy the Saint Patrick's parade in March and gather after the festivities to the 10 o'clock mass at St Michael's church, support their GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) team and read the latest edition of the *Fermanagh Herald*—the main Republican newspaper in Fermanagh. This mind-boggling view based on stereotypes was the basis for the invisible wall that divided them during the conflict and so on. Nevertheless, the *Impartial Reporter*—the main Unionist newspaper in the region—maintained a section about the GAA activities in the county, the Mart on Tuesday nights welcomed all farmers in the region regardless of their political background, and during the weekend football matches, the locals would not distinguish what parish they belong to as long as they would score for the team. For many reasons, Enniskillen was not a typical town during the conflict in Northern Ireland, and it is not difficult to comprehend the implications of the deadly attack in 1987 within the community. This complex dynamic between the two communities was exposed worldwide just hours after the bomb went off in that cold morning of November.

The community that gathered in grief

The chilly weather dressed the crowd for the occasion. Wearing warm coats over their best garments, hundreds of people gathered in Belmore Street, Enniskillen, to wait for the Remembrance Day annual ceremony to start. The “Poppy Day” is a tradition largely associated with the Two Minutes' Silence observed in the United Kingdom—and all the Commonwealth. It evokes the day and time that the Great War ended in 1918—at 11 a.m. on November 11—and celebrates the soldiers who died in combat. In Northern Ireland, this tradition is also largely associated with the Protestant community, meaning that in that cold morning of 1987, almost half of the population of the town would be appreciating the festivities around the Cenotaph.

The public stood firmly waiting for the parade to begin. Everything seemed to be running according to plan. Nobody could really anticipate that at 10.53 a.m. an explosion would bring everyone to silence. Without any warning, a bomb went off minutes before the parade covering the people in grey and red. The rubble of the blown-up building buried men, women, elderly, kids— whoever was unlucky to be caught by the blast. “At the time, when we went to remember our dead, we didn't expect to be digging them out” (McDaniel 7), said a young boy who was near to the St Michael's Community Centre, where the bomb was planted by the IRA. Eleven people, all civilians, all protestants, and all from Enniskillen, died in the tragedy.

When the British journalist Nicholas Witchell appeared on TV that night to present the extended version of the BBC News at 10.05 p.m., the red poppy flower on his lapel had enhanced its own meaning. That day, the flower was not only a symbol of remembrance but, also, a symbol of an inexperienced hope. No one, even the Sinn Fein, supported what the media called “a carnage”, and only 12 hours after the bomb

had gone off in Enniskillen, a consensus about the “last atrocity” of the IRA was firmly shaped and spread worldwide by the press. That Sunday, Mr Witchell presented the live program with a serene countenance, as the BBC anchor must have known of how much that was an opportunity to rethink the conflict in Northern Ireland and to call the world’s attention for the atrocities of terrorism of any kind. The British Broadcast Corporation and other media outlets focused their reports on the unity and resilience of the community in Enniskillen.

The editorial published by the *Fermanagh Herald* on the week of the bombing was a call for understanding. “The Last Atrocity” (14 November 1987) exposed the divergent point of the people living on the shore of River Erne from the most places besieged by the northern Irish conflict. “In the period of numbness which follow such an atrocity, a community like Enniskillen, where Catholics and Protestants share so much in the course of everyday life, it is natural that the community should try to emphasize its unity in grief,” (*ibid.*) wrote the newspaper.

Forthwith, the agreement around the latest IRA atrocity in Northern Ireland generated a wave of sympathy from the media outlets worldwide. Howell Raines, executive editor of the *New York Times* – at that time based in London – wrote from the scene an article entitled “In an Ulster City, Grief for 11 and Rage The bombers are accused of desecration.” As Mr Raines framed the wretchedness that took place in the community in the awakening of the tragedy, one report highlighted a peculiar characteristic of the town. The American journalist described a meeting in the Chamber of Commerce, where members from the community discussed about closing all business on the Tuesday for a day of mourning following the attack. Raines sensibly captured one of the most important nuances about that community, as showed in this paragraph:

Gerald Nicholas, a Scotsman living here since 1973 as manager of Woolworths, opposed the idea. ‘We’re basically saying to the people who have done this, you’ve actually achieved something, he said. You’ve actually made the whole community shut down. Cyril Johnston, a baker, immediately charged that as someone “not being born and bred in the community,” Mr Nicholas could not understand that the day of mourning was a ‘mark of respect for those people who have been cut down. (*The New York Times*, 10 November 1987)

What may be difficult to grasp – from an outsider perspective – was that the partnership developed in the community overpowered the segregation pattern in Northern Ireland, to maintain its economic aspirations. Throughout the coverage of the attack, the *New York Times* published 12 articles from November to December in 1987, generally focusing on the outraged caused by the IRA. It was in fact “news worth” to report that in Northern Ireland, the conflict was far from being black and white, meaning that the complexity showed in Enniskillen could be a gimmick for peace campaigners.

The shops in Enniskillen closed following the Remembrance Day Massacre. A meeting held in the Enniskillen Chamber of Commerce had discussed what would be

the best way to show their respect for the victims, and the decision was unanimous. With the stores at Belmore Street closed to repair, the town stayed at least three days “out of business”. The president of the Chamber of Commerce, Mr John Agnew, said everyone was numbed that such an event could happen to such a closely-knit community like Enniskillen (*Fermanagh Herald, op. cit.*).

In the *Impartial Reporter* the name and face of the eleven dead were displayed in the front page of the 12 November issue right after the attack, and their stories were told, one by one, in that special issue that covered the tragedy. For them, those people were not just a number in the list of casualties in the Northern Ireland conflict, they were fathers, neighbours, mothers, clients and friends. To pay respect and attend their funerals, closing the stores was the most reasonable choice. Thus, several thousands of mourners gathered in the Methodist Church in Darling Street, as much more waited outside the church to attend the funeral of the student nurse Marie Wilson, the youngest victim of the attack. She was only 20 years-old at the time. This was one of the most well-known events reported by the press as a demonstration of the community resilience. Her father, Gordon Wilson, was a very known figure in the town, and made a speech that let everyone with a lump in their throat. Marie would not be missed only by her family, but by everyone she touched during her short life.

The service was broadcast by speakers, so everyone could hear the ceremony and pray for her outside the church. Marie was described by Rev Thomas Magwan as “a young girl that glowed with life” (*Impartial Reporter*; 14 November 1987). She was the kind of person who was always willing to help others, as a nurse, she was very friendly, gaining the affection and attention from the staff of Erne Hospital, where she worked (*Fermanagh Herald, op. cit.*). The *Impartial Reporter* described the scene: “Darling street was thronged with mourners standing shoulder to shoulder. Protestants and Roman Catholics stood together to pay their respects to Marie Wilson. In the article entitled “The Girl with Everything to live for”, the *Fermanagh Herald* described her last moment with her father, and her last famous words.

Ten seconds later we were both thrown forward as rubble and stones rose up in the air, over, around and under us. I was thinking I wasn't hurt when I was aware of the pain in my right shoulder. I shouted to Marie “Are you alright?” and she answered “Yes” and she took my hand and I was aware we were under six feet of rubble, she said she was alright, but she was pulled underneath. Three or four times I asked her if she was all right and she always said “Yes”, but she also let out screams. When I asked her the fifth time, she said: “Daddy, I love you so much.” Those were the last words she spoke to me (*op. cit.*).

Her funeral ceremony was described as a service of Thanksgiving for the life of Marie, reflecting the positive and forgiving attitude of the Wilson family, which has earned admiration of the world. Mr William Prescott, delivering the flowers for Marie's funeral, said: “Words don't express what everyone wants to say. They are just deeply

and utterly shocked. No one I have spoken to has even eaten since it happened, they are so upset (*The Guardian*, 10 November 1987).

Gerry Moriarty wrote for the *Irish Press* a two-page article about the funerals held on Tuesday, 10 November 1987, in Enniskillen, entitled “The day a town cried...”. “Three funeral services were held in Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian churches at the centre of the town, after which each sad, sombre procession paused in silent recollection at Armistice monument, scene of Sunday’s blast. It was a day of hard words of condemnation and soft words of condolence that passed off peacefully with dignity and sorrow” (*ibid.*). The *Fermanagh Herald* also reported from the funerals: “Local people gathered in their thousands each day and cried unashamedly with grief as the North looked on in sympathy. The size of the corteges at all the funerals, which included representatives from outside Fermanagh, North and South of the border, was indicative of the great public sorrow.” (21 November 1987).

In the Letters section of both local newspapers, people urged to fill the pages of words of sympathy. One of the letters was published by the *Impartial Reporter* and signed by someone using “disgusted” as a codename. The piece started by stating that he or she was Catholic and Nationalist and was very much ashamed for what happened in Enniskillen. He or she hoped that the community would should its will to compromise and stick for a better future. In another piece, a priest-to-be also wrote a heartfelt testimony. Kieran Murphy, student at St Patrick’s College in Maynooth, wrote to the paper: “Catholics and Protestants under a common bond of Christian fellowship, must unite in prayer against evil which the Satan is working in our community” (14 November 1987). In fact, the Letter section had become a place to display the sympathy for the injured and dead. In a community, that words are carefully spoken or even thought, it was a great display of trust. In a statement in the *Fermanagh Herald*, the Fermanagh Trades Council appealed to all trade unionists to ensure that the stand against the sectarianism “spill out on to the streets of the North and isolates the few mindless people who are holding this part of Ireland to ransom by their violence and intimidation” (21 November 1987). Another Enniskillen man, Mr Tom Palmer, who was well known for his work with the mentally handicapped in the county, said the people of Enniskillen has been united in a week of grief (*ibid.*). And Mr Davy Kettyles, the Worker’s Party spokesman for Fermanagh and Tyrone, said the atrocity had moved and rocked the community and he said now was the time to seize the opportunity it had provided for condemnation and hope to move forward together. “Now is time to end, in this community, the “them” and “us” syndrome which has contributed so much to our present-day “Troubles”. Now it’s time to back up good words with good deeds” (*ibid.*).

Outside Northern Ireland, the *Irish Press* published in the 19 November 1987 issue two letters about Enniskillen. The first one, signed by Una O’Higgins O’Malley from Booterstown, County Dublin, praised the spirit of reconciliation revealed in the aftermath of the Enniskillen bombing.

In our part of the world, at least, Christian faith has had a profound effect, the late Marie Wilson and her father have touched many hearts, the Cardinal's plea for forgiveness on behalf of the Catholic community has evoked respect in most quarters, while the "born-again" Mrs. Lynass at the Birmingham appeal displayed a rare courage – to mention only some of the developments brought about through belief in Christ, which have spread hope in a time of great trouble. Moreover, politicians such as the Lord Mayor of Dublin and of Limerick and the whole Seanad (applauding the gift of a poppy from Ballymoney's Senator Robb) have risen to the situation with distinction – to say nothing of the tens of thousands of "ordinary" people who queued patiently to sign books of condolences whatever the weather.

All in all, I think it has to be said we are making progress slowly. . . .

Yes, slowly we are beginning to realise that the North's agony is not extraneous to us but is something in which we too have a part. A study document launched in Dublin and Belfast last week (and now available in main bookshops) attempts to spread this awareness further, acknowledging that it is the past attitudes of us all that has helped to bring about devastation such as the Enniskillen I disaster. . . . Naturally, it puts forward no instant solutions but would expect considerable reduction of tension and violence if Christ's call to love of thy neighbour were truly responded to, both in our faith and in our politics. It is called "Towards an Island that Works – Facing Divisions in Ireland," and costs 60p. (*ibid.*)

The Churches also urged for reconciliation. Most Rev Dr Joseph Duffy, Bishop of Clogher, made to an overflow attendance on a Thursday night, at a special co-celebrated Mass in St. Michael's Church, for the victims, the bereaved and the injured, of the previous Sunday's bombing in the town. And, although the congregation was a cross-community one, his plea was directed at the Catholic community and, in particular, at "people who claim to belong to our community" whose actions on the previous Sunday, he said, had aroused feelings of shame and acute embarrassment, "at the dreadful wrongs done to innocent Protestants". There could be no doubt that the Lord had been with the community since Gordon Wilson spoke to the world," said Rev Duffy (*ibid.*). It was ironic, he said, that an atrocity such as the bombing should have happened at a time when so many people were showing a greater will to work together and to understand each other's point of view.

"For the Catholic community, last Sunday has stopped us abruptly in our tracks in a way that few of the tragedies of the past 20 years has done. We are made painfully aware of how fragile is the cohesion of our two communities". And, while the public display of sympathy which people had witnessed all week was commendable, it was far from being a sufficient response. He went on:

I am here to ask our Catholic people, even at this eleventh hour, to take a new and carefully-considered stand against violence and the promotion of violence in all its forms. Public opinion across the five Continents of the world has made

this demand on us loud and clear as never before. After last Sunday, there should never again be any serious conviction that a campaign of political violence leads anywhere other than to cruel corruption and loss of innocent lives. (*ibid.*)

Overall, sympathy and solidarity with the local community was exhibited throughout the town in the following days of the bombing. A report from the British *Observer* entitled “Poppies of blood and hope” gives an overall account of how the sense of community was displayed in Enniskillen after the attack. It claims that the I.R.A. bomb filled the Catholics with remorse but revived Irish hope for peace. Colin Smith wrote from the scene:

Every single schoolboy in the group near the front wears a Haig Fund poppy in his blazer. These are the boys from Protora (*sic*) Royal School, a Protestant establishment whose old boys include Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett and Henry Francis Lyte, the author of the Anglican hymn “Abide with me”, which, to everyone’s is delighted amazement, is to be sung for the first time at St Michael’s that night.

The boys without poppies are from St Michael’s college. This is Protora’s counterpart, the Catholic community’s grammar school. (They still have the 11 plus in Northern Ireland). As a rule, Catholics do not wear poppies in Ulster.

“Remembrance Day is seen as a British thing,” says Fr John McGabe, a priest from the Republic who teaches English and Religious Studies at St Michael’s. Fr McGabe had, however, observed sixth formers wearing the poppy in the silent vigil which the people from Enniskillen had staged around the war memorial on Wednesday evening. “It was a gesture.”

Would they wear them at school?

“No, we don’t allow the wearing of any political emblems, badges or suchlike.”

The poppy is political?

“Here it is.” (*The Observer*, 15 November 1987)

The subtleness of the symbols in a divided society has a strong significance when times that words cannot be expressed in a proper manner appears to force the urge for expressing the most profound thoughts. Protestants wearing poppy flowers in a Catholic church and Catholics wearing poppies in a vigil for Protestants victims during the Troubles in Northern Ireland seems to fit perfectly in this situation. The article written by Colin Smith on *The Observer* ends with this following message, that resumes in a few lines the commotion caused by these acts of unity in 1987. “Enniskillen means “Island of Kathleen”, the lady in question being the wife of a man called Balor of the Mighty Blows. Hopes have been expressed that the name will now become synonymous with the beginning of the return of peace to Ireland” (*ibid.*)

The Enniskillen bombing was a big component for the development of the *spirit* of reconciliation that remains until this day. After 30 years of the Remembrance Day

bombing, there are still signs of the conflict. But certainly, Enniskillen now is also a synonymous for resilience, therefore, for peace.

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