

13 Reconciliation

"And at one point Pat was talking about his community and what they suffered and how he felt. How he cared about them. And I saw in him now a man with a story, who suffered, who struggled. He's not just the man who planted that bomb. I didn't meet him to change him, I didn't meet him to get an apology. I met him just to see him as a human being. Because he was THE most demonised person in that time. And that wasn't gonna help me. But it would help me to see him as a human being."

Joanna 'Jo' Berry



Patrick Magee

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In 1984 a bomb went off in the Brighton Grand Hotel where the Conservative Party was hosting their conference. Over thirty people were injured and five died: Muriel MacLean, Jeanne Shattock, Roberta Wakeham, Eric Taylor and Anthony Berry. The main target, Margaret Thatcher, walked out of the blast unscathed. The IRA claimed responsibility and Patrick Magee, the only ever convicted person for the bombing, ended up with multiple life sentences in prison. He served fourteen years when paramilitary prisoners whose organisation had signed up to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement were granted an early release. Around 500 loyalist and republican volunteers walked through the prison turnstiles before completing their sentences. In 1999, Pat Magee was one of them.

Ex-prisoners play a crucial role in creating conditions for peace, a fact that is often overseen. Former prisoners helped to bring about the West Belfast festival as an alternative to the confrontational bonfires that were lit annually to commemorate internment. During the Holy Cross dispute in 2001, when loyalist residents tried to prevent Catholic girls to walk through their street in order to get to school, ending up with the army having to escort them, it was mainly down to former prisoners that the months-long gauntlet-running came to an end. Prisoners were not merely released, many involved themselves in some sort of community work, focusing on young people and interface violence, increasing cross-community interaction, trying to contrive situations to get people together.



Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre, Woodvale Road, Belfast

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Being involved in cross-community tension transformation doesn't necessarily imply discarding key ideological views or decrease inter-community distrust. Polar ideological opposition between former enemies often remains, despite the willingness of line-crossing, engagement and openness to dialogue. They work with each other without trying to persuade one another of their respective beliefs. Or as a UVF-member states,

"I firmly believe that there are differences that I have with republicans and nationalists that are never going to be resolved. But my relationship with them has been transformed from one of demonisation and just wanting to destroy them, to trying to create a society in which we can live together and have those differences."

There will never be an agreement on history narratives and that's not a solely Northern Irish experience. The peace process with the GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT at its heart has somewhat ironically consolidated difference by institutionalising 'Otherness'. Instead of tackling the fundamental issues of division it went for appeasement and accommodation which surely ameliorated the situation in a sense that it brought an end to open war and facilitated political participation for all, but – for the sake of peace – pushed basic grievances under the carpet and kept the unionist and nationalist communities segregated.



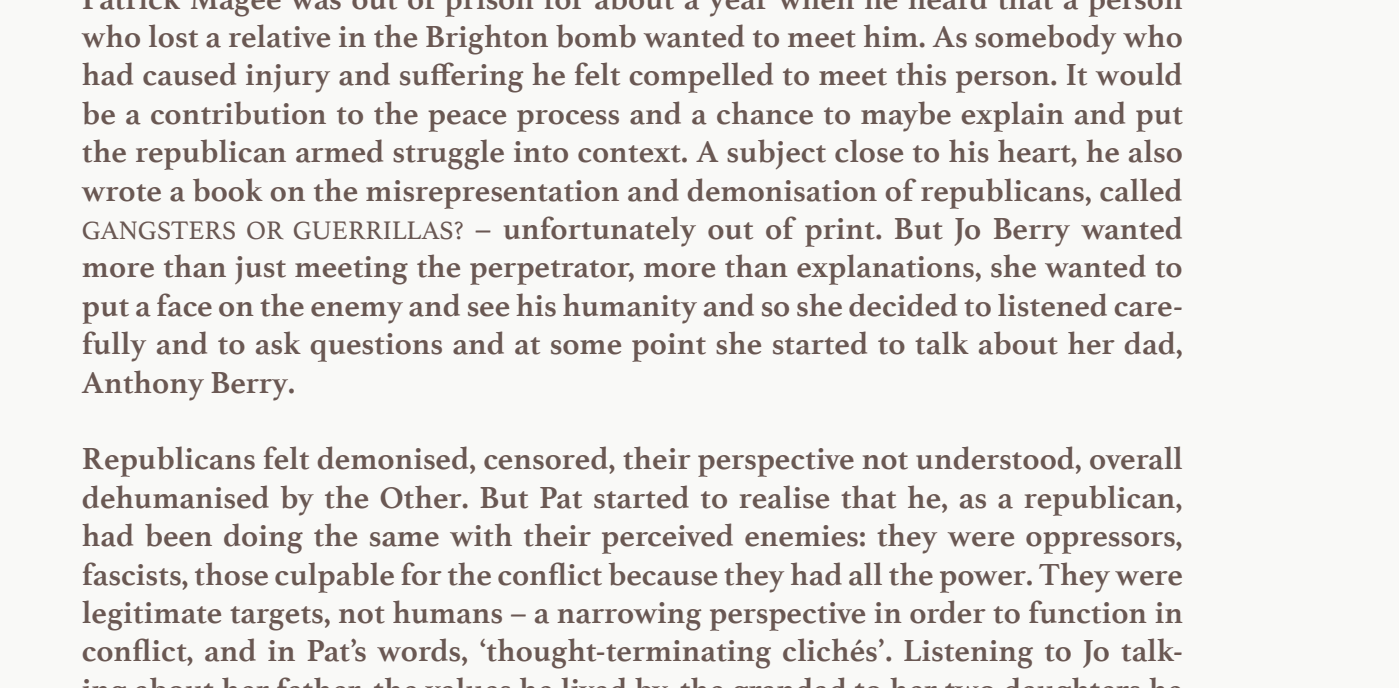
Catholic and Protestant side of Alexandria Park, Belfast

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There are sports clubs and the arts and there are welfare organisations and community centres promoting cross-community engagement and inter-community care. However, a hurt people can't heal on the shoulder of civic society when the political agenda doesn't support it. Right across the divide, families still seek for answers on why or how their loved ones were killed, injured, punished, targeted, disappeared, defamed, locked up, interned or otherwise banished. The past hasn't been dealt with properly and it lies there, underneath, nagging and to re-surface and to become the question and pain of the next generation.

"Dealing with the legacy of our past and building meaningful reconciliation is complicated and delicate. If we are to unite hearts and minds and nourish a genuine hope for lasting peace and reconciliation in Ireland, then we have to work together on healing the legacy of our shared past, because peace can only flourish in the light of knowledge, truth and justice." Eamon Martin, Archbishop of Armagh

The British government is doing the very reverse. With a blind-eye-defeat-and-concealment-of-truth-strategy it is planning to implement a statute-of-limitations to end all prosecutions of military veterans and ex-paramilitaries for Troubles incidents predating the GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT 1998. It's been complaining about the 'witch hunts' and 'vexatious prosecutions' of soldiers now in their 70s, 80s and 90s. The reality is, the British government doesn't lose anything by granting paramilitaries amnesty but risks its reputation if details around army and MI5 proceedings during the Troubles emerge. British state violence, collusion with loyalist paramilitaries and sectarian manipulation shines an uncomfortable light on the government. So the secretary of state Brandon Lewis and his boss Boris Johnson say that prosecutions don't work, don't do justice to the people, there is too little evidence after such a long time, and that amnesty is a great idea, it will allow the people to draw a line under the past and help them to move further along the road to reconciliation.



March for Truth, City Hall, Belfast

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Memorial for the victims of the Sean Graham bookies shooting in 1992, Belfast

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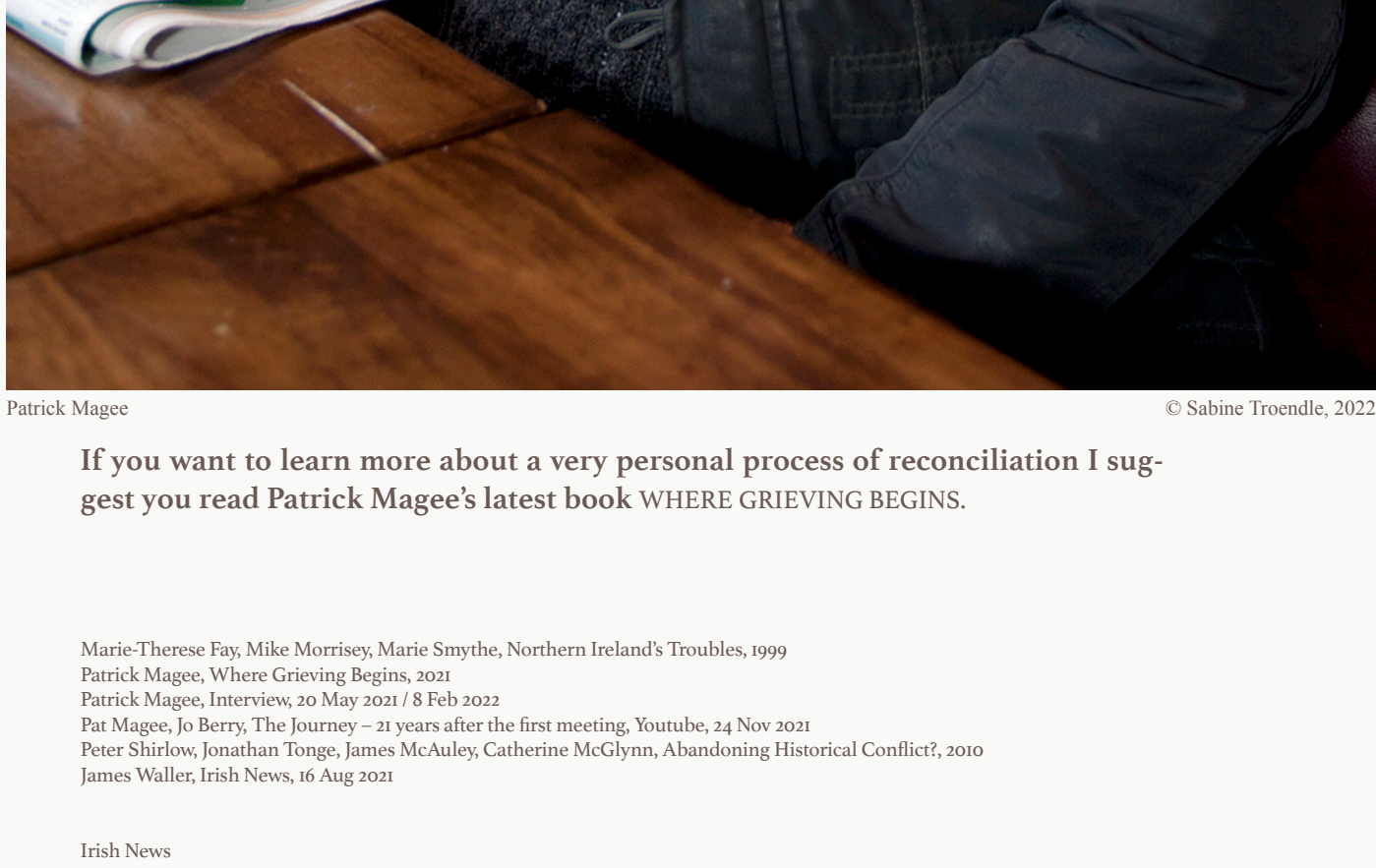
Even though there are groups who support the soldiers in some ongoing inquiries on legacy issues, the legislation is opposed by all the main political parties at Stormont, the Irish government, the Church and victims' and survivors' groups from all sides. All the covering-up, frustrating and undermining of successive attempts to get justice doesn't make the families go away. They understand the challenges in decade old cases. They understand that the likelihood of getting actual prosecutions are slim. But justice is not simply getting a conviction, it's a process and it's truth-finding, as the recent Ballymurphy inquest illustrates. No soldier will go to jail for the killings of 11 people in 1971. But it was publicly and officially acknowledged by Justice Keegan that the victims were all innocent and not members of the IRA posing a threat and therefore gunned down lawfully, as was the army's version. After 50 years the stain on the reputation of the deceased and their families has been lifted. And there are many more like the Ballymurphy families who have yet to get truth and justice for their loved ones.

"Forgetting is not an acceptable, or even possible, response to a history of conflict. Forced amnesia leaves a deep societal instability. The account of organising forgetting re-victimises and re-traumatises the victims and survivors of conflict. Wounds left untreated, and unacknowledged, make it even more difficult to ease the tensions of a deeply divided society." James Waller, Author



Press conference of the Ballymurphy families after the ruling in court

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Ruling of 'innocence' announcement at Ballymurphy inquest, Belfast

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Conflict is damaging to all people, no matter the side they're on. Public acknowledgment of the suffering is an important part for societal recovery. Moving away from a world, where retaliation and revenge are accepted forms of expressing anger and grief towards a peaceful society means to remember the harms done and pains suffered. To remember what has been forgotten, covered up, denied and silenced. It helps to understand each others' experiences and facilitates empathy for the Other as the quite remarkable story of Jo and Pat illustrates.

Patrick Magee was out of prison for about a year when he heard that a person who lost a relative in the Brighton bomb wanted to meet him. As somebody who had caused injury and suffering he felt compelled to meet this person. It would be a contribution to the peace process and a chance to maybe explain and put the republican armed struggle into context. A subject close to his heart, he also wrote a book on the misrepresentation and demonisation of republicans, called GANGSTERS OR GUERRILLAS? – unfortunately out of print. But Jo Berry wanted more than just meeting the perpetrator, more than explanations, she wanted to put a face on the enemy and see his humanity and so she decided to listened carefully and to ask questions and at some point she started to talk about her dad, Anthony Berry.

Republicans felt demonised, censored, their perspective not understood, overall dehumanised by the Other. But Pat started to realise that he, as a republican, had been doing the same with their perceived enemies: they were oppressors, fascists, those culpable for the conflict because they had all the power. They were legitimate targets, not humans – a narrowing perspective in order to function in conflict, and in Pat's words, 'thought-terminating clichés'. Listening to Jo talking about her father, the values he lived by, the grandad to her two daughters he would never be, the close relationship she had with him – it was then that something shifted in Pat's awareness and it dawned on him that he had killed not just a member of the enemy, but Jo's father. A human being. And probably a fine human being, considering Jo being such a fine woman.

"Something has unveiled in that moment for me and I think that's been at the heart of our – for sure my – journey ever since. Trying to get a wider perspective of those we were in conflict with and understand their pain, their side of it, their story. Now I had learned from the experience of meeting the Other, and in my former ignorance, delusion, arrogance, I hadn't foreseen how valuable and how liberating that lesson would be in terms of my own humanity and perception of the world." Pat Magee

Pat's motivation moved away from a solely political obligation to a personal need for understanding and to listen and hear what Jo had to say. And he became a good listener, someone who would notice and care – someone to trust.

"After three hours I said to Pat I'm gonna go now. And he said to me 'I'm really sorry I killed your dad. And I said something to Patrick that I don't think he understood at the time. I said 'I'm so glad it was you'. His preparedness to engage, to feel the emotional impact, to actually know he killed a human being, and all that means is huge. And I acknowledge that. I felt like I've broken a taboo in society but I knew I wanted to go back." Jo Berry

Despite the fact that Pat had killed Jo's father, despite all the differences, they continued to meet and further their dialogue. After 21 years and hundreds of conversations, it's still not easy. Calling it friendship seems to be most inappropriate but there's a depth of trust and a readiness to engage in direct and painful conversation with each other again and again. Jo remembers being on a plane with Pat, going to a peace conference to give a talk and Pat was teaching her to do cryptic crossword puzzles.

"We're just like two friends looking at a crossword puzzle. And on one level, that is very normal, but it's not normal. It doesn't feel like I'm just seeing anyone. Because, he did plant that bomb to kill my father but he is also the man who's engaging me for 21 years, who I've travelled with and we're changing the story. And for changing that story, I feel like something is healing deeply inside myself." Jo Berry

That deep healing Jo is talking about doesn't necessarily mean that she has forgiven Pat. There's a lot of pressure around forgiveness. People have given up their religion because they were angry and couldn't bring themselves around to forgive. Jo prefers the concept of empathy, which she feels is empowering and can actively heal rifts and divisions between the parties. Empathising means putting yourself in the Other's place. Knowing more about Pat's community, Jo started to wonder, had she lived his life, would she have made the same choice? Realising that, there was nothing to forgive, only understanding empathy. That's how she felt with loyalist volunteers and British soldiers she was engaging with in conflict transition workshops as well. Pat himself would never ask for forgiveness:

"What I've done in the past was in full consciousness. What I can say is that I'm conflicted because of that past. I can't forgive myself, because I don't know what that means. The best I can hope for is through this process of re-engaging with the past that I can somehow be less conflicted about this." Pat Magee

The political and societal inequality that lead to the armed struggle, Pat believes there was no other way. He continues the republican struggle by confronting the post-conflict narrative of those who wouldn't give the republican perspective any legitimacy. He engages in difficult conversations and uncomfortable truths. It's about empathy and understanding. In Northern Ireland the physical conflict has more or less ended but there's tension under the surface and things are still raw. Pat's notoriety that accompanies him to this day in certain places along with his republican stance might make it hard for some people to accept him as an ambassador for peace. Something he had to painfully realise when the charity CAUSEWAY ceased to exist within weeks after it was launched. The interest was there but the political situation of the time and the outworks of a divided society made it impossible for the Protestant and loyalist population to attend the venue with Pat Magee at its centre.

Jo went on to establish the charity BUILDING BRIDGES FOR PEACE and Pat's been working with her. Together they're giving talks and workshops around the world, underlining the charity's vision of peace in the world through a non-violent way and understanding the reason for violence. Jo and Pat's journey is remarkable and it is possible and generally evokes hope that damaged relationships from conflict can be restored. There's no way around dealing with the legacy of conflict. It's essential on a personal, political and judicial level. Simply telling the people to draw a line under the past doesn't work.

Patrick Magee

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If you want to learn more about a very personal process of reconciliation I suggest you read Patrick Magee's latest book WHERE GRIEVING BEGINS.

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