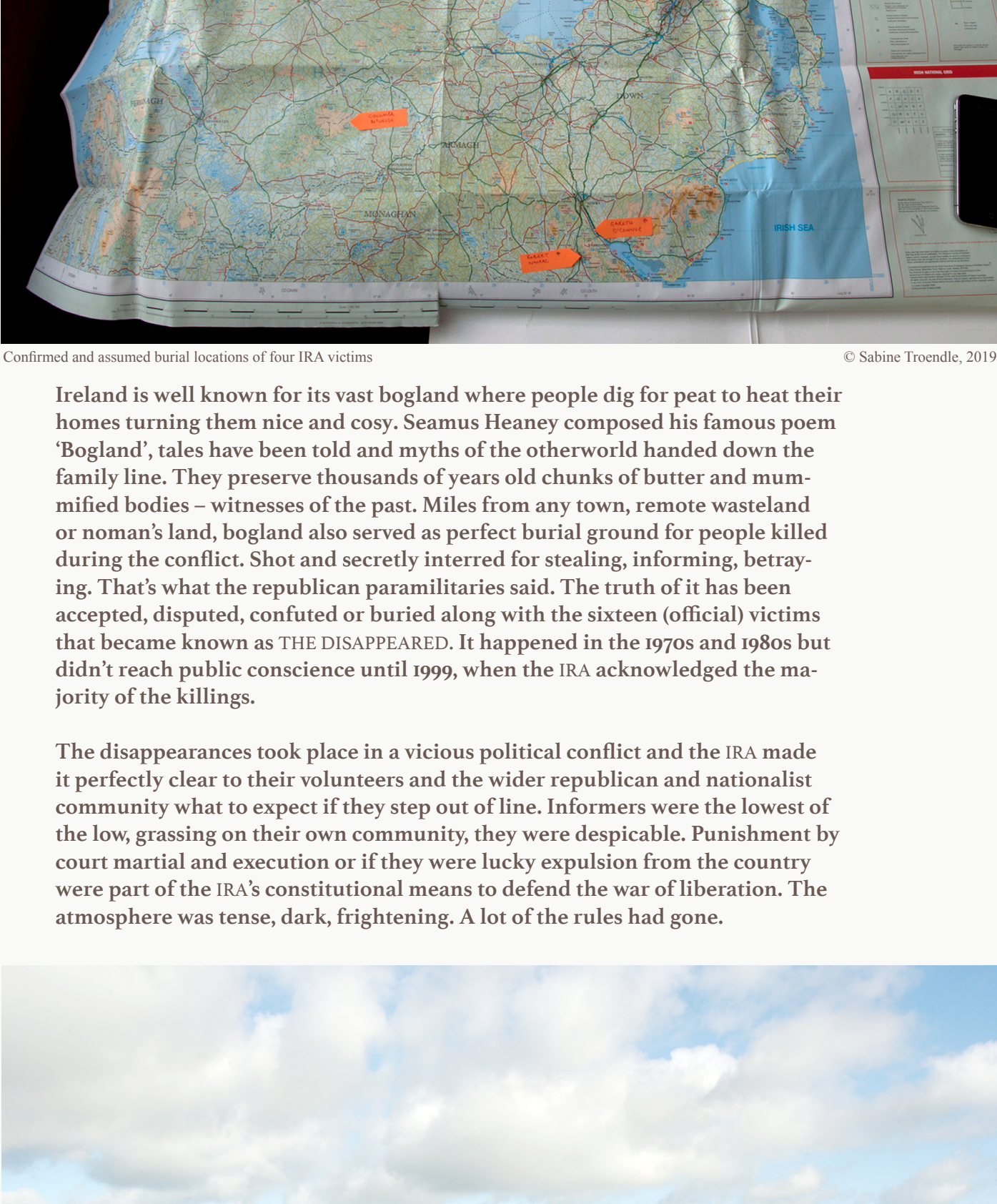


12 *The Disappeared*

"At nights we stand and look up at the stars, and beg the moon: 'please tell us where they are: 'cause you're the only friend who saw them die and the only friend who now knows where they lie.' So many questions keep runnin' thro' our heads and at times our hearts still won't believe you're dead. But, if and when we fin'ly bring you home, oh you'll never ever ever rest alone."

Extract from the song YOU'LL NEVER DISAPPEAR, composed by Malachy Duffin

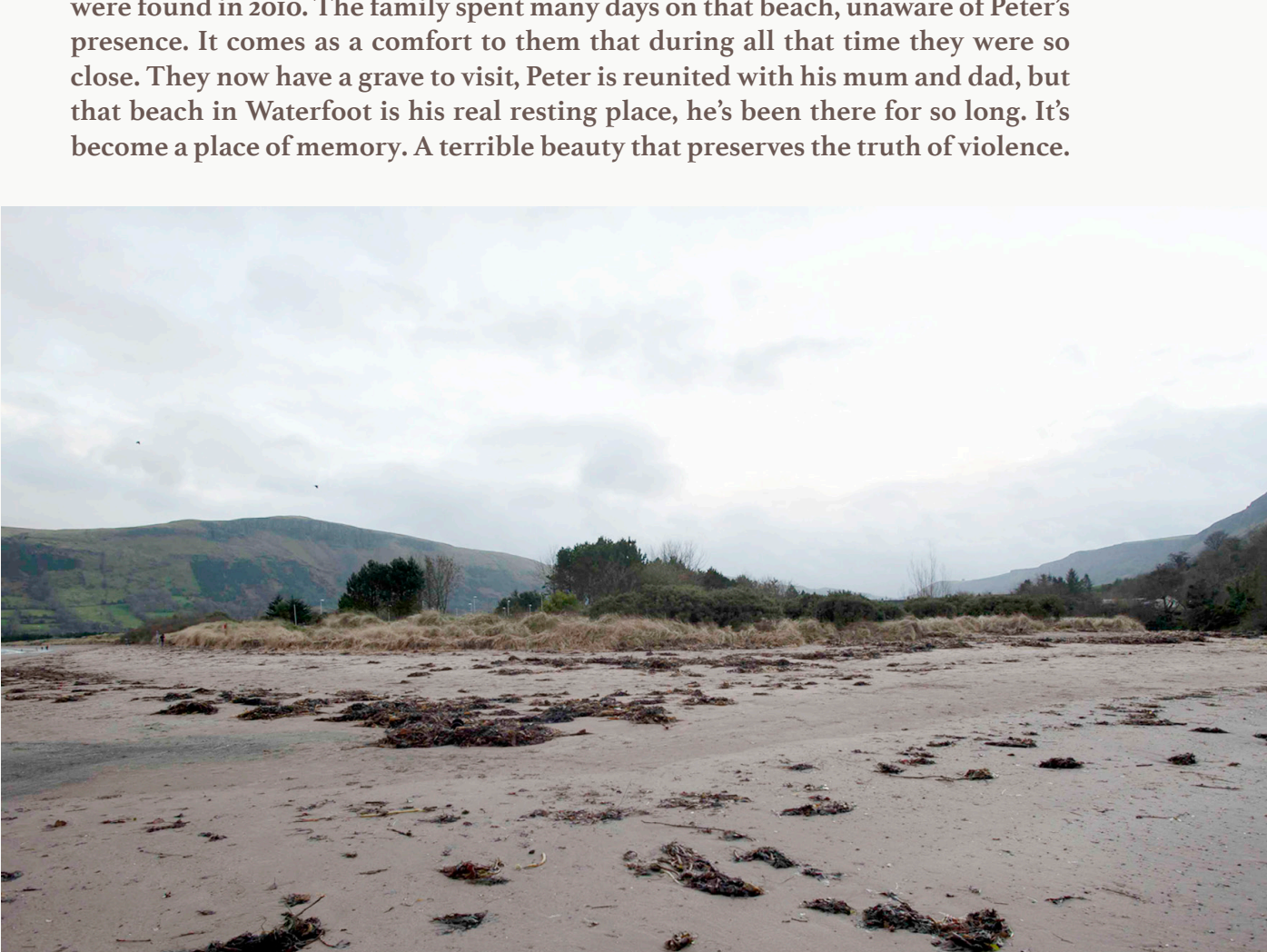


Confirmed and assumed burial locations of four IRA victims

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Ireland is well known for its vast bogland where people dig for peat to heat their homes turning them nice and cosy. Seamus Heaney composed his famous poem 'Bogland', tales have been told and myths of the otherworld handed down the family line. They preserve thousands of years old chunks of butter and mummified bodies – witnesses of the past. Miles from any town, remote wasteland or noman's land, bogland also served as perfect burial ground for people killed during the conflict. Shot and secretly interred for stealing, informing, betraying. That's what the republican paramilitaries said. The truth of it has been accepted, disputed, confused or buried along with the sixteen (official) victims that became known as THE DISAPPEARED. It happened in the 1970s and 1980s but didn't reach public conscience until 1999, when the IRA acknowledged the majority of the killings.

The disappearances took place in a vicious political conflict and the IRA made it perfectly clear to their volunteers and the wider republican and nationalist community what to expect if they step out of line. Informers were the lowest of the low, grassing on their own community, they were despicable. Punishment by court martial and execution or if they were lucky expulsion from the country were part of the IRA's constitutional means to defend the war of liberation. The atmosphere was tense, dark, frightening. A lot of the rules had gone.



In 2014, the remains of Brendan Megraw were found in Oristown Bog, Co. Meath

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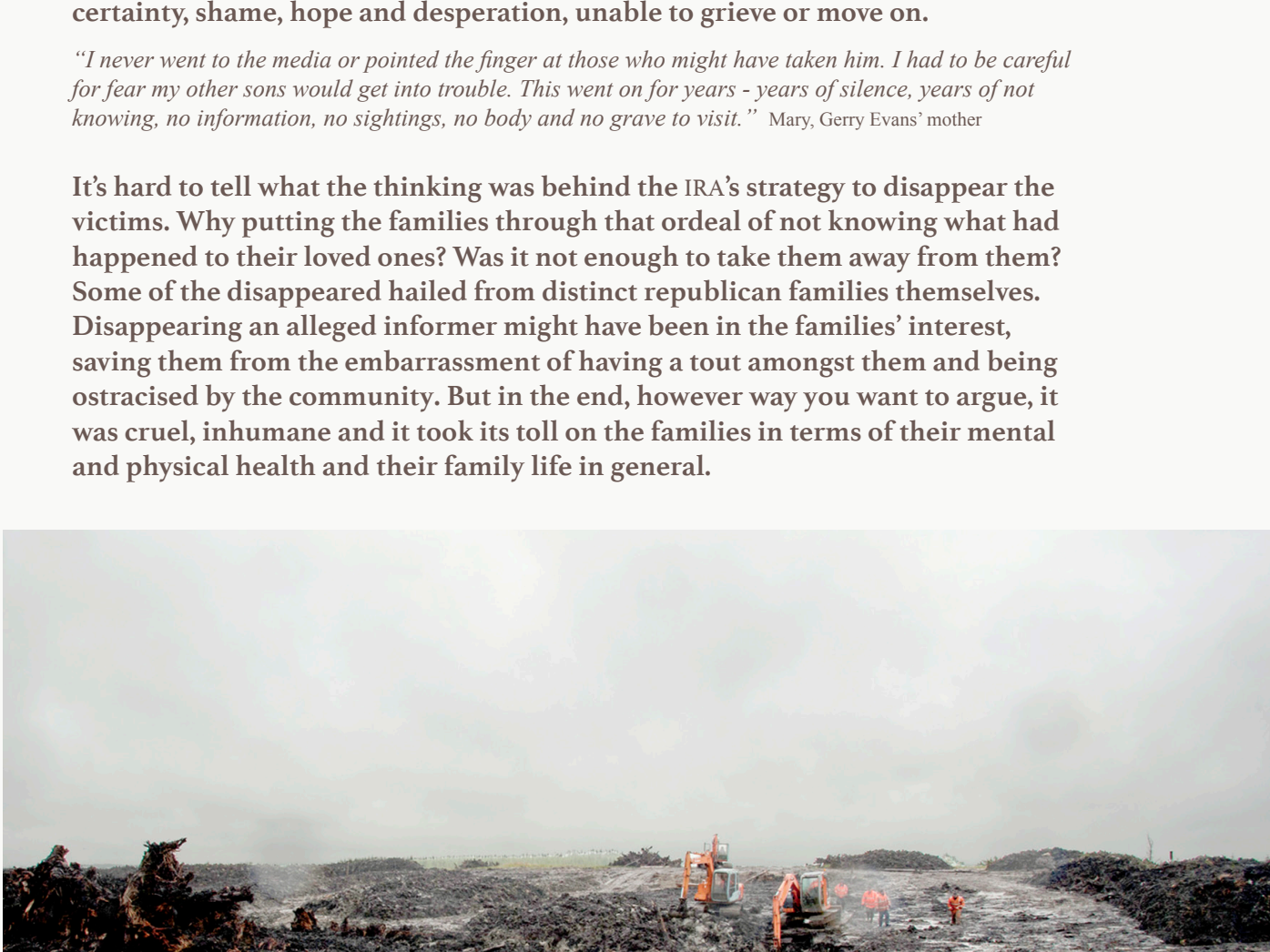
Brian McKinney made the mistake of stealing from paramilitaries – weapons, according to the IRA, money according to the family, that he spent on a pair of shoes for a mate and hamburgers and Chinese take away. They came after him and he paid it back, thinking that was it, when it wasn't. A week later the IRA took him over the border to Colaghagh Bog from where he was recovered in 1999, 21 years later. His mum Margaret said that it was like murdering a child,

"I never thought that there was anything seriously wrong with him, just that he was very childish, but when he was fifteen he was diagnosed with a genetic condition, he had the mind of a six year old. My Brian was just five foot tall. He had chronic asthma and a wee learning disability. God love him. He was naive and easily led. Brian was a threat to no one."

Although 21, Peter Wilson had learning difficulties and the intellect of a 14 year old. He was talking about joining the army – a Catholic boy from west Belfast – there was an innocence about him. When he didn't come home from playing football in the park, against all odds, the family started to think he might have gone away with the army anyway, because

"he had stayed with the army for five days. He wasn't arrested but rather went voluntarily, he was interested. They kept him for most of the week in the guise of letting him see the base and telling him about army life but the real reason was that they wanted to get information out of him about the IRA. Back then the army and the police were recruiting informers all the time." Patricia, sister of Peter

The IRA accused Peter to be an informer, shot and buried him at a picturesque beach on the Antrim coast and kept quiet about it. That was in 1973. His remains were found in 2010. The family spent many days on that beach, unaware of Peter's presence. It comes as a comfort to them that during all that time they were so close. They now have a grave to visit, Peter is reunited with his mum and dad, but that beach in Waterfoot is his real resting place, he's been there for so long. It's become a place of memory. A terrible beauty that preserves the truth of violence.



Peter Wilson was found in 2010 in Waterfoot, Co. Antrim

© Sabine Troendle, 2018



In 2003 Jean McConville was found on Shillington Beach, Co. Louth

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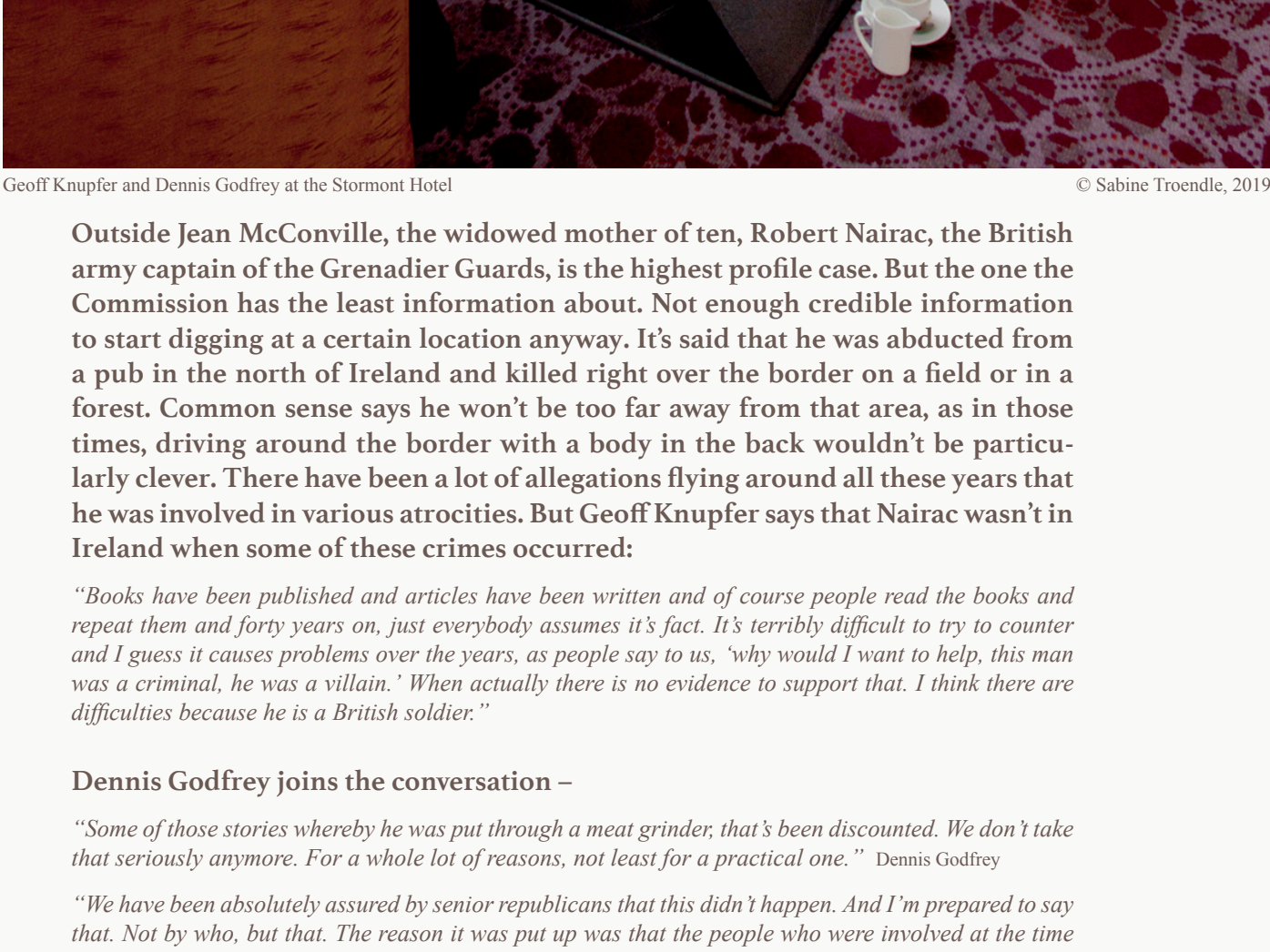
The same organisation that took on the role of protecting the tight knit Catholic communities from attacks executed the people from within that community they thought were informers. The volunteers were part of that community, maybe a neighbour or former classmate. They would sit beside the victims' families at mass, they would be their taxi driver or standing in front of them at the grocer's. The stigma of having a relative that is accused of being an informer would be isolating, the whole community would be cautious, trying not to be associated with you. In violent conflict, asking questions, speaking out and challenging the dominant power can be dangerous. So instead of offering support and assistance, people mainly tried to stay away from these dark things and avoided the bereaved.

"We were warned against asking too many questions about what might have happened or who might have taken him. But what were we supposed to do? It was complete insanity, my son had just vanished off the face of the earth and we were expected to do nothing about it. The way that we were treated, especially having no one to turn to." Margaret McKinney, Brian's mother

Silence was everywhere. In the neighbourhood, the church, at work, within families themselves. They were told in various ways not to ask questions and they were misled into believing that their loved ones were still alive. For decades the wives, parents and children lived in a sort of purgatory, surrounded by fear, uncertainty, shame, hope and desperation, unable to grieve or move on.

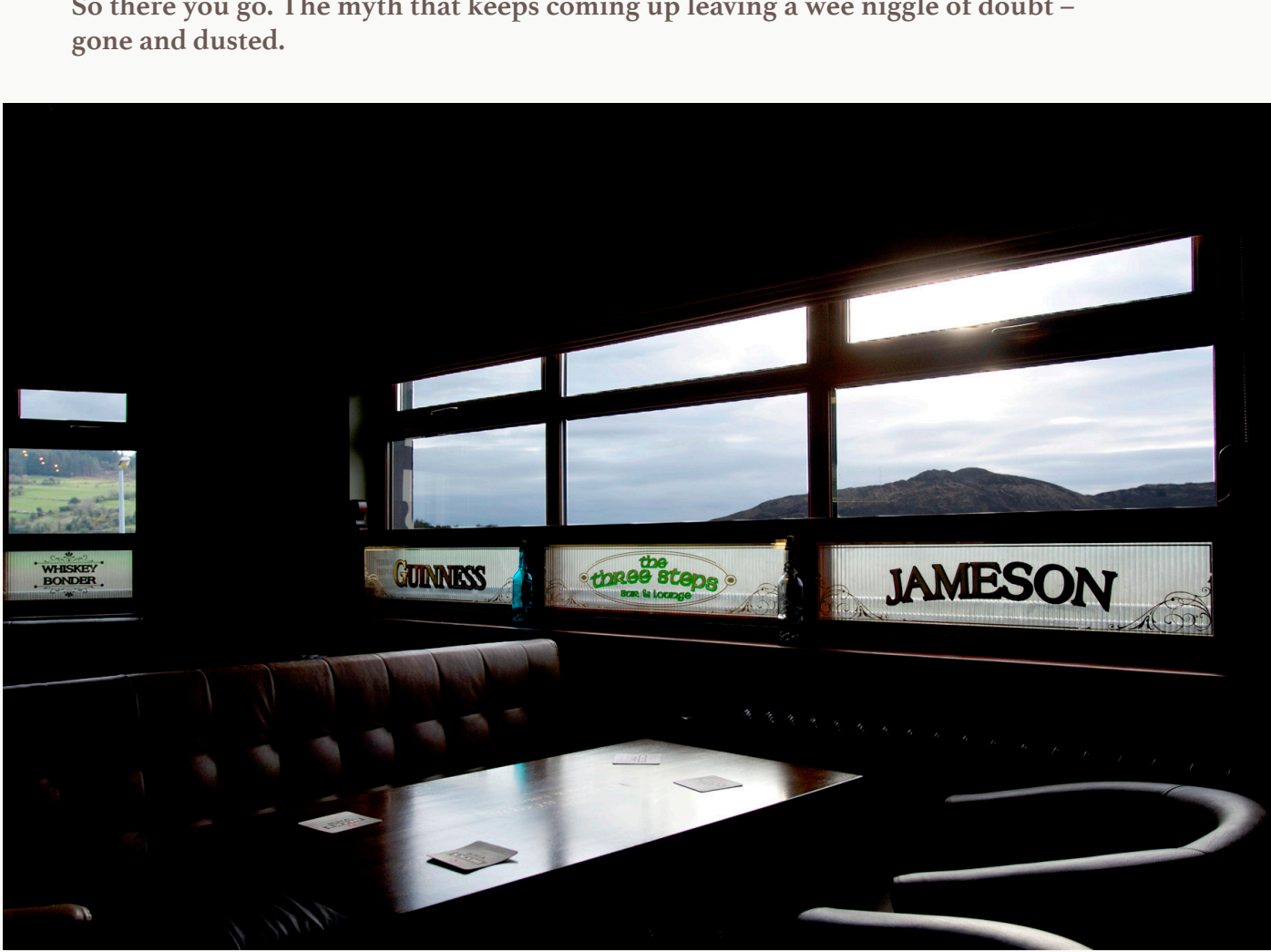
"I never went to the media or pointed the finger at those who might have taken him. I had to be careful for fear my other sons would get into trouble. This went on for years - years of silence, years of not knowing, no information, no sightings, no body and no grave to visit." Mary, Gerry Evans' mother

It's hard to tell what the thinking was behind the IRA's strategy to disappear the victims. Why putting the families through that ordeal of not knowing what had happened to their loved ones? Was it not enough to take them away from them? Some of the disappeared hailed from distinct republican families themselves. Disappearing an alleged informer might have been in the families' interest, saving them from the embarrassment of having a traitor amongst them and being ostracised by the community. But in the end, however you want to argue, it was cruel, inhumane and it took its toll on the families in terms of their mental and physical health and their family life in general.



Latest search for Columba McVeigh at Bragan Bog, Co. Monaghan

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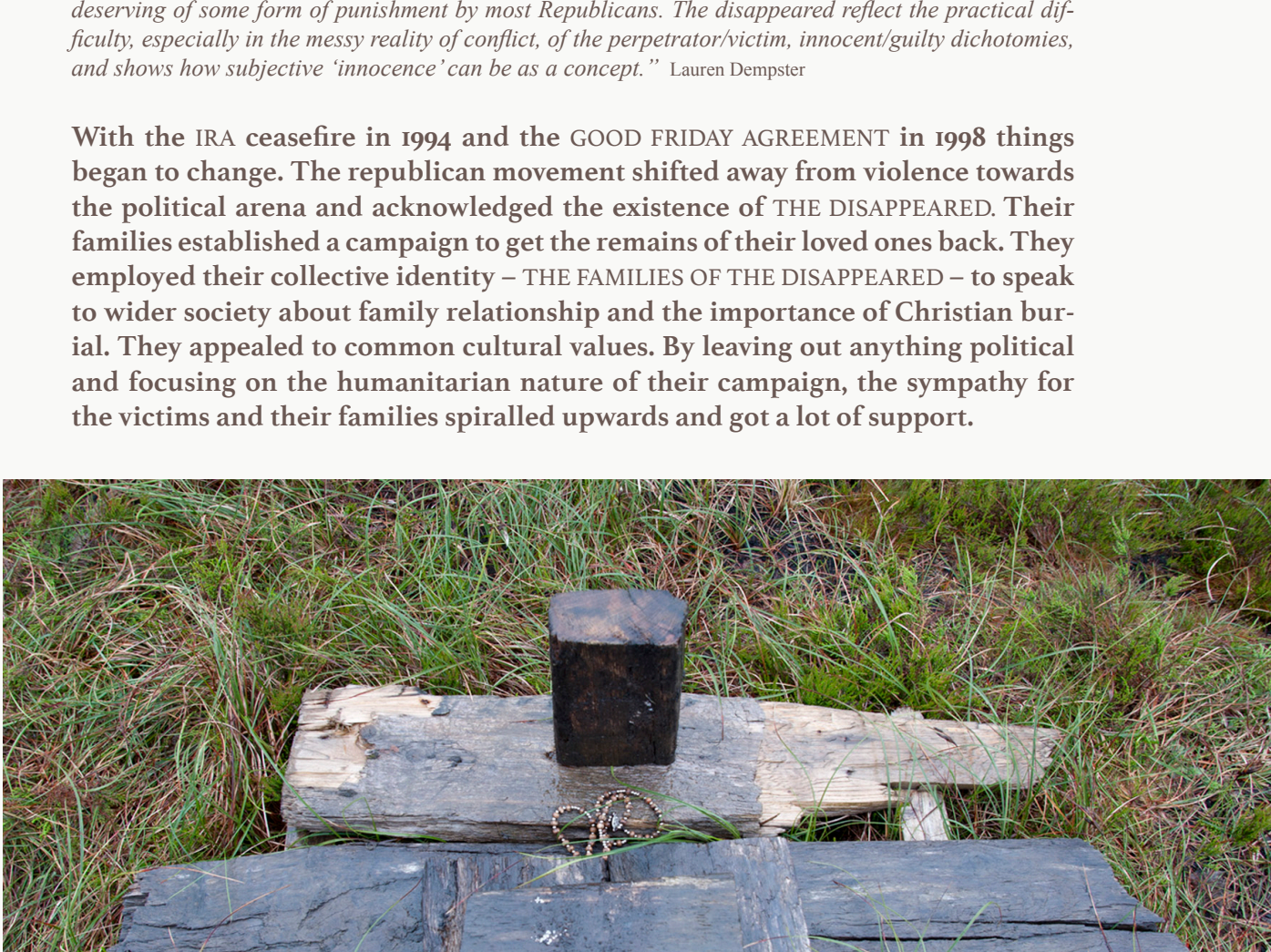
Search crew for Columba McVeigh at Bragan Bog, Co. Monaghan

© Sabine Troendle, 2019

While republican paramilitaries pulled the trigger, the state's and security forces' involvement can't be dismissed. For the sake of getting information about the IRA they recruited people, mostly young and naive men from the republican community, using all kinds of methods, cajoling, bribing and compromising, not shying away from planting false evidence in order to coerce and threaten them into collaboration. A responsibility the state to this day doesn't fully acknowledge but cost the lives of young men such as Columba McVeigh, who was murdered and disappeared for admitting to the IRA to be a British army agent with instructions to infiltrate the republican army. He was a 19 year old boy with learning difficulties and hardly any meaningful information for the British state.

Columba is one of three disappeared still missing. The latest search at the remote Bragan Bog in Co. Monaghan ended in 2019 without a result. As part of the peace process the INDEPENDENT COMMISSION FOR THE LOCATION OF VICTIMS' REMAINS (ICLVR) was established. All information given to the commission is entirely confidential, it can't be used in court and anonymity is guaranteed. People with information for the commission cannot be prosecuted.

Information is mainly coming from the republican movement, with which the commission has established an absolute trusting relationship in the more than two decades of their existence. The ICLVR's head of the investigating team Geoff Knupfer, and media adviser Dennis Godfrey, who is also a member of the board of the WAVE TRALMA CENTRE, which was instrumental to get the ICLVR started are adamant that if Columba was buried where they are told, they would have found him. The problem is that memories might not be totally accurate after all that time, let alone the amount of stress involved during the operation in pitch dark night. Also the landscape might have changed. Trees grow, tracks disappear, buildings are gone.



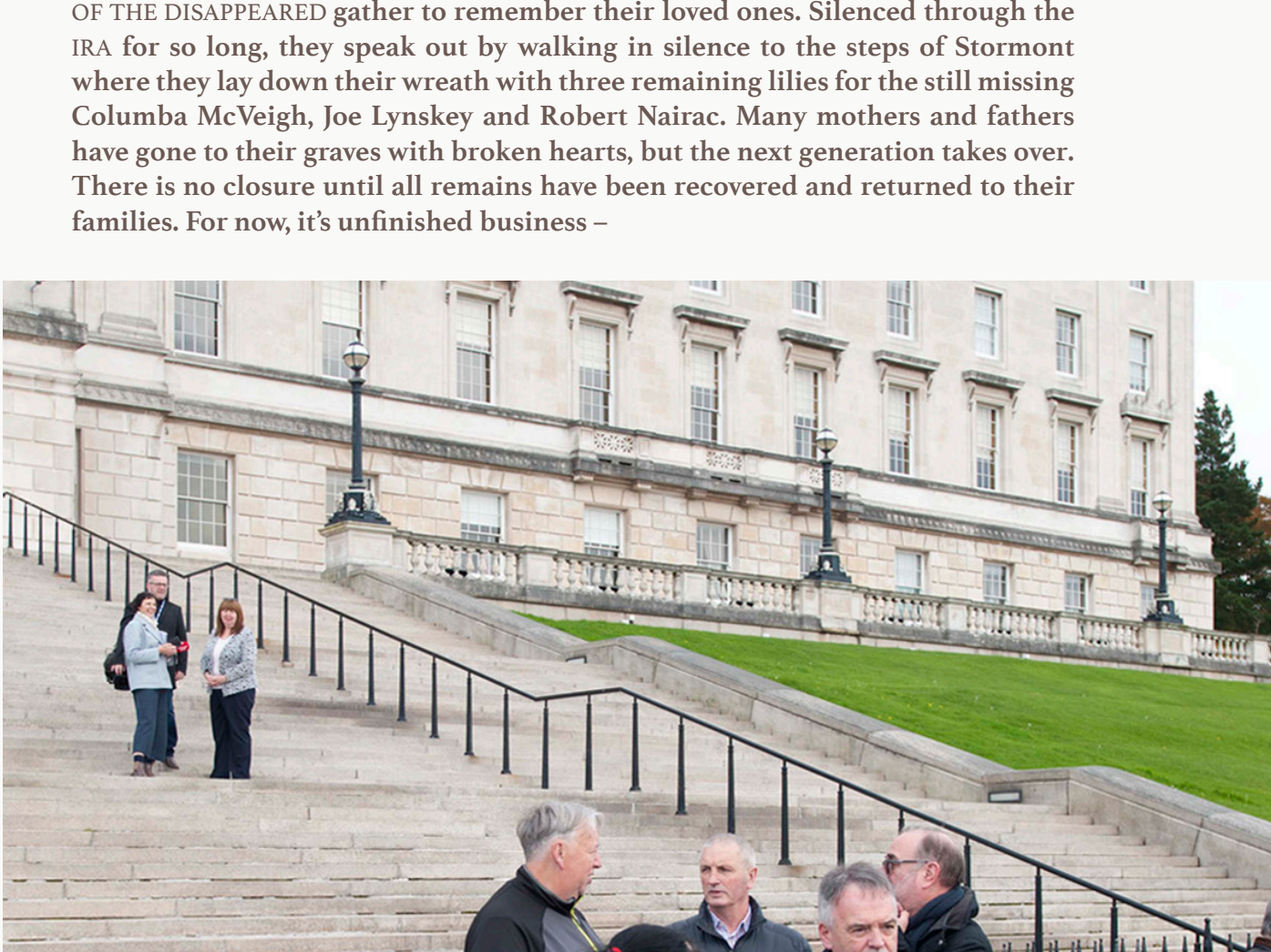
Geoff Knupfer and Dennis Godfrey at the Stormont Hotel

© Sabine Troendle, 2019

Army captain Jean McConville, the widowed mother of ten, Brian Nairac, the British army captain of the Grenadier Guards, is the highest profile case. But the one the Commission has the least information about. Not enough credible information to start digging at a certain location anyway. It's said that he was abducted from a pub in the north of Ireland and killed right over the border on a field or in a forest. Common sense says he won't be too far away from that area, as in those times, driving around the border with a body in the back wouldn't be particularly clever. There have been a lot of allegations flying around all these years that he was involved in various atrocities. But Geoff Knupfer says that Nairac wasn't in Ireland when some of these crimes occurred:

"Books have been published and articles have been written and of course people read the books and repeat them and forty years on, just everybody assumes it's fact. It's terribly difficult to try to counter that. Not by who, but that. The reason it was put up was that the people who were involved at the time were trying to get the security forces off their backs." Geoff Knupfer

So there you go. The myth that keeps coming up leaving a wee niggles of doubt – gone and dusted.



The Three Steps Bar in Derrinree, South Armagh, from where in 1977 Robert Nairac was abducted

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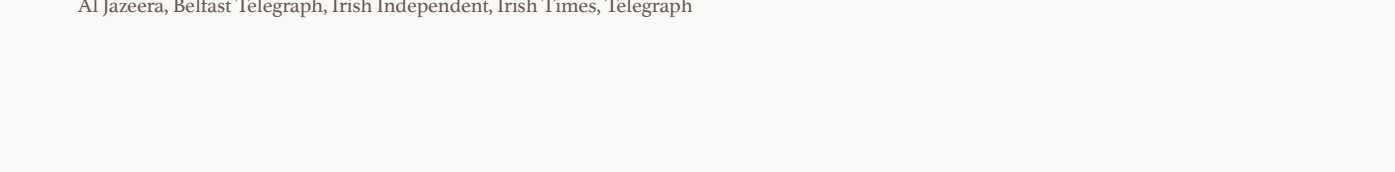
Shrine for Columba McVeigh at Bragan Bog

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Before his recovery in 2017, the family of Seamus Ruddy lit candles, gathered wild flowers and left a crucifix at the site where he was assumed to be buried. They brought soil from their mother's grave to mix it with the local soil and brought local soil back to reunite mother and son in a symbolic gesture. Unlike in many other western countries, rituals around death and burial remains a major event in Ireland. Susan McKay says that –

"the idea of not allowing the families to recover the bodies so that they can give them a proper Christian burial – there's not allowed to be any closure because there isn't any ceremony of death. It's the inhumanity of it, and also the absolute disrespect to a culture – the Republican culture – which highly regards the rites of passage of death."

Brendan Megraw's mother, like many other mothers, put her son's name on the family gravestone hoping to have him reunited with them if not in life, at least in death. She died before he was found. Each year on All Souls Day THE FAMILIES OF THE DISAPPEARED gather to remember their loved ones. Silenced through the IRA for so long, they speak out by walking in silence to the steps of Stormont where they lay down their wreath with three remaining lilies for the still missing Columba McVeigh, Joe Lynskey and Robert Nairac. Many mothers and fathers have gone to their graves with broken hearts, but the next generation takes over. There is no closure until all remains have been recovered and returned to their families. For now, it's unfinished business –



13th annual All Souls Silent Walk

© Sabine Troendle, 2019

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Lauren Dempster, Transitional Justice and the 'Disappeared' of Northern Ireland, 2019
Dennis Godfrey, Geoff Knupfer, Interview on 21 January 2018
WAVE, Trauma Centre, The Disappeared, 2012

Al Jazeera, Belfast Telegraph, Irish Independent, Irish Times, Telegraph