

The many faces of Ulster: Liz Thomson meets the President

'I belong to a generation of Irish people who are library attenders and book buyers'

THE taxi driver, who is himself originally from Birmingham, has noticed we are not locals. "When we get to this next roundabout, we'll be entering Catholic West Belfast," he explains, to myself and Brandon publisher Steve MacDonogh, whose author, Gerry Adams, I am about to interview. We turn on to the Anderstonstown Road and look for number 147, Connolly House, a Sinn Fein office named after James Connolly, founder of the Irish Socialist Republican Party. A Tricolour marks the spot, hanging forlorn in the drizzle. We get out, press the buzzer on the iron gate and are admitted to a dark, depressing Victorian building devoid of personal touches. The front room is furnished only with a vast table and assorted tatty chairs. Another Tricolour is propped up in a corner. The windows are boarded. The air is stale.

The Sinn Fein President arrives some fifteen minutes late, mobile phone in hand, apologizing profusely: he has been involved in negotiations over the Apprentice Boys march. Dressed in chinos, polo shirt and blazer, an emerald peace symbol in his lapel, he is smiling and pleasant but somewhat distracted. It has been a busy week, with the opening of the West Belfast Festival in which Adams plays a key role. My copy of *Before the Dawn* catches his eye: it is the first time he has seen a finished copy of his memoirs, which Brandon and Heinemann publish jointly next month. He seems pleased, though the jacket photograph is not to his liking. A burly minder declares it "big".

Civil rights organiser

A chronicle of his childhood and youth, of his days as a civil rights organiser, and the road — via Long Kesh and H-Block — to the Sinn Fein Presidency and peace talks, it is not exactly an impartial account. But then neither is *The Downing Street Years* objective. Doubtless, many will disagree with Adams' version of events and all but the committed will take issue with his relegation of IRA activities to a distant theatre of war. For example, "an IRA bomb attack in Brighton almost killed Margaret Thatcher, architect of the hunger strike deaths, and her Cabinet," is a remark calculated to enrage.

And yet, and yet... Between the rhetoric and the selective memories there's plenty that's a matter of historical record, one that's become submerged during the quarter-century of armed struggle. Ulster's Catholics were an oppressed minority and the



Gerry Adams: an autobiography

direct action on housing, employment and civil rights for which Adams and others of his generation fought peacefully in the late sixties is long-forgotten by most of us. Then came August '69. The protests were less peaceful and the Army arrived for what was intended to be a short stay.

Did Adams feel it should have remained a non-violent movement? "No, not necessarily. First of all, you have to remember the situation was already very violent. So it struck me at one level that you could pull the whole thing down around you and the most strategic and tactical way to proceed was to keep everything if not entirely peaceful then unarmed... I probably wouldn't have thought it was going to continue like that indefinitely, because the physical force tradition in Ireland is part of mainstream politics because of the unresolved nature of the causes of the conflict here. My sense was that we were riding a tiger as the summer went on."

That year, Adams was still working as a barman, his first and last job, for, by the end of the year, he had quit in favour of full-time activism. Even then, he writes, he cautioned against IRA involvement, arguing that it would make for a protracted gunfight which the RUC would ultimately win. "I remember in 1972 being censured because I'd said something like this was going to take at least ten years to sort out. I had some sense that it was going to be a long struggle. I couldn't have known that it would take 25 years."

Like all of his generation and those younger, Adams' life has been shaped by the Troubles. The eldest of ten children, he was born in 1948 to a family with a long history of Republican and trades union activism, with members on both sides having served time for their beliefs. His father was frequently out of work but Adams writes of a childhood that was as emotionally secure as it was materially deprived. Sometimes he lived with his paternal grandmother, "Granny Adams,"

whom he credits with encouraging his bookish habits.

"I read everything I could get my hands on from a certain age," he remembers. "I belong to a generation of Irish people who are library attenders and book buyers... Granny Adams was a member of at least two libraries." Reading was what got Adams through prison (he remembers his surprise at encountering fellow-inmates who'd never before read a book) and he cites Steinbeck, Alice Walker and "all the run of Irish writers including Roddy Doyle" as favourites. "I'm also fascinated by Garcia Marquez, his massive use of language, plot and subtext and all of that." He finds writing "therapeutic".

Conscious of financial burdens

He passed the 11-plus and his parents hoped that he'd go on to university but, conscious of the financial burden that imposed, he left before his A-levels and took a bar job. "I think both my parents were bitterly disappointed that I dropped out of school but I think they probably became reconciled to that in the years between then and 1969. When '69/'70 happened, it was such a communal uprising that everybody got caught up in it." Adams must surely have had childhood ambitions? He pauses, seeming to find the question genuinely tricky. "Well, it's a bit difficult to answer that because I think politics probably subverted the other ambitions I had and totally took over. I suppose I had an ambition to play football and hurling for County Antrim in the All-Ireland... The college I was at [St Mary's] has delivered up a whole range of lawyers, architects, teachers and doctors and the only one of those in which I showed any great interest would have been to do with teaching English, Irish language."

Somewhat paradoxically, Adams says years of unrest finally came to a head when they did precisely because

a generation who, thanks to the 1948 Act, had enjoyed the benefits of a university education, graduated with expectations (and demands) for a life better than that lived by their parents. That and television, with its images of Martin Luther King marching on Washington to enunciate his dream — images that, for Adams at least, were "romantic".

In *Before the Dawn*, Adams describes how he reorganized Sinn Fein, unbanned by Northern Ireland Secretary William Whitelaw (other accounts suggest he also reorganized the IRA, though charges that Adams was himself a member never did stick) and writes at length of internment and the hunger strikes, two events which, as even "ordinary" Catholics acknowledge, were defining factors in an escalating conflict. For much of the time, Adams himself was on the run (there was a bonus for the soldier who could arrest him), rarely sleeping two nights in the same bed. During a night's conflict in Ballymurphy, he proposed to fellow activist Colette McArdle. Their 25-year partnership has produced a son, Gearoid, now 22 and training to be a teacher. He refuses to be drawn further. "A long time ago, I stopped talking about my family except in general terms, basically because they are individuals in their own right."

From as early as 1972, says Adams, his preference was for a political solution. By the turn of the decade, he was telling people there could be no military solution. "I said it was a political problem and I argued for the building of Sinn Fein within its own right and as a political alternative to the Establishment." The talks with John Hume and the SDLP began in the mid-Eighties. "He and I first had a number of meetings ourselves and when those ended we continued exchanging views. They became public by accident in Easter of '93 and we were then moved — because the story was broken by a journalist just spotting the two of us together — by the various developments of that time to

make a series of public pronouncements. The nub of that was a run of broad principles which we felt could be a foundation. I think if John Hume and I did nothing else we proved to people that there was another way out of this situation." He has asked Ian Paisley for talks: there has been no reply, he says.

But why did it take so long to get to that point? "There was a public debate for a number of years which was all about whether the British Government was neutral, whether armed struggle was the only way. And the IRA position was that those who were attacking the armed struggle needed to come up with an alternative. They also pointed out — and it's a view which I would share — that the British Government is not neutral." For the first time, there was a consensus between "elements in the North" and the Irish Government and an American president committed to putting the Irish question on the political agenda.

Suing for peace

"We could then go to the IRA and say: not only 25 years into the struggle is it time to start suing for peace and not only is there an opportunity to make some headway but we also have the Irish Government, the SDLP, Sinn Fein and Irish America with the possibility of the White House coming on board on a broad democratic platform on the one hand for equality of treatment here and on the other for a peace settlement through negotiation and through democratic dialogue. The IRA could have said no."

Once again, Adams makes the organization sound remote from his own life. Surely he knows people in it? "Yes, I do know people in the IRA." Does he control the IRA? "No. The media representation of this actually leads to a total misunderstanding of the situation. You're dealing here with



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