

ent of Sinn Fein and a Special Branch officer's widow



Donegal Street, Belfast after a car-bomb explosion

historical and contemporary political experience. It is not within the gift of one person to control any of the forces involved."

Was he shocked by the Canary Wharf bombing? "I think anyone who tells the truth of the situation knew that the peace process was going to break down. There weren't any talks. Nonsense was made of the whole issue of decommissioning, but what was fuelling the issue on the ground was the refusal to move on the question of prisoners. I think the big breaking point in the popular imagination was around the time of the visit by President Clinton. The dogs in the street were saying it was over. In November, it was a year and however many months and the Presidential visit saved the situation. There was a joint communiqué from the two governments. That was all long-fingered until February. The Mitchell Body came in. Sinn Fein welcomed the report. John Major threw it out. John Hulme says when he heard that he knew it was over. I knew it was over. Everyone knew it was over." Hugo Young, writing in the *Guardian* the Monday after Canary Wharf, attempted to set the outrage in the context of Major's intransigence.

Could not Adams have asked the IRA for extra time? "No," he replies, again citing "media misinformation". Then what is the point of negotiating with Sinn Fein if it can't control the IRA? "Because we have an electoral mandate," he says, adding that following the Docklands bombing, he felt like "a spectator into a situation in which you are also a main player." The situation has been complicated by unforeseen changes in the Irish Government but, he points out, the IRA had been persuaded to call for "a complete cessation of armed actions which they were, in their statement, outlining as an opportunity for peace... They weren't persuaded to end war but to sue for peace to bring about a settlement. When that didn't come about they could quite justifiably say: look,

we did our best, we've kept it for a year and a half."

Allowances, if that is the word, were made for Canary Wharf but not for the destruction of Manchester. And how does Adams answer criticism that his appearances on television following such an outrage, regretting the damage and loss of life and limb, are entirely cynical? "Well, I think it's justifiable," he replies before deflecting the question and talking once again about London's handling of the peace process.

In IRA terms, there is a "point" to blowing up an Army installation. But what did they ever hope to gain by blowing up innocent civilians? "Well, I don't see any point to it either and I have long since moved away from seeking even to explain the tactical or other inflections of IRA operations." Why does he carry the coffins of IRA bombers? "That shows a misunderstanding of the situation again. That person was a neighbour, a member of the community. I would feel a political need to express solidarity with his family, with the rest of the people in the area who are demonized because of his action."

Has he hope that Sinn Fein, with its stated desire for peace deriving from a political situation, will ultimately prevail; that, in the short term, progress can be made? He does not subscribe to the idea that Major is a prisoner of the Ulster Unionists. "But he's a unionist in the sense of not wanting to be the British prime minister who would preside over the break-up of the United Kingdom. I think there is a sense among the English Establishment of the union of the United Kingdom and this place being the thread which, if they pull it out, everything starts to unravel... I think the short answer is that John Major does that John Major does because he doesn't want to see the union ended. But I don't think we can wait until he goes; I think we have to keep working with whatever British prime minister happens to be in power at the time. It may be the reality that you won't get any movement until you've a government there that has a different complexion but you can't sit and wait. You have to keep pushing."

Our interview concludes and Adams, his minder-driver, MacDonogh and I get into his car in search of a coffee. On the way down the Falls Road to Al Culturlann, a cultural and community centre, Adams points out Milltown Cemetery, where two of his siblings lie buried in pauper's graves and the scene of countless IRA funerals, the beautiful Falls Park and the Springfield Road Barracks. The Sinn Fein President as tour guide is a strange experience, like a scene from *Zelig*. Adams has been charming and, chatting with him, you have to keep reminding yourself that, at however many removes, he remains, for many, indelibly stamped with the violence of the IRA.

In a taxi en route to the airport, the driver asks me about my day. A Catholic, "though I don't go to mass", he recalls being sent out to give soup and sandwiches to the soldiers. He'd been suspicious of Adams, initially writing him off as another De Valera. Now, he wasn't so sure and felt him to be serious in his search for peace. "He's caught between a rock and a hard place. I hope he succeeds, because if he doesn't, we'll have another 25 years far worse than the last."

Before the Dawn: an autobiography is published by Heinemann in association with Brandon on 23 September, price £17.99

A battle for peace

WHEN the RAF Chinook slammed into the rugged cliffs of the Mull of Kintyre, in June 1994, killing all 29 intelligence officers en route to a security conference in Scotland, Dr Susan Phoenix knew there was one promise still to keep to her husband Ian, dead amid the blazing heather. That was to go through his notes and diaries, "kept in a safe place" while he was a Special Branch officer working in the RUC, and to produce from them a book — one which would paint an honest and objective account of a quarter-century of "Troubles" in Northern Ireland.

Phoenix: Policing the Shadows will make uncomfortable reading for the Northern Ireland office, for MI5, for the judiciary — and for the Prime Minister himself. For it shows how often those at the forefront of the fight against terrorism, the RUC, found their operations hampered by powerplay between MI5 operatives anxious for promotion, by petty bureaucracy, by lack of training and by lack of knowledge and understanding that surely hampered decision-making at every level. "There were just too many ill-informed civil servants around; I doubt that the right information ever got passed up. I doubt that it ever reached the Prime Minister," says Dr Phoenix. By implication, the peace process may be fatally flawed.

Ian Phoenix, who joined the RUC from the Paratroopers in 1970 and who worked as an undercover agent from 1979, helped thwart many IRA and UVF operations in Northern Ireland and on the mainland. Working with protected informers and with information gathered via surveillance operations, his aim was always to trail suspects for as long as possible before moving in, at which point arrests could be made and arms and information seized. Too often, operations on the mainland fell well short of that goal, as Special Branch, anxious not to lose a suspect and to make an arrest, moved in too early. "Ian would say they didn't have enough balls," says his widow. "He also felt there was a lack of training."

Premature arrest

Patrick Magee was arrested "prematurely" in Glasgow. The trail which led to the Brighton bomber and two female accomplices had been uncovered by Phoenix, who travelled with five officers by ferry to Scotland. He had to move fast and so funded the cost of the tickets personally. Despite the success of the operation, senior officers refused to reimburse him on grounds that he hadn't gone through the correct procedures. "Ian was not a procedures person. And perhaps there was some jealousy that he'd been the one to find him," suggests Dr Phoenix.

Phoenix had believed that a united Ireland was only possible if there was first a united Northern Ireland and, to achieve that, the Province had to be "cleansed" of the terrorists who made the lives of both Catholics and Protestants an everyday misery. In short, that all those remotely involved should be jailed. A recurring theme of the book is that too many people were acquitted on grounds of "insufficient evidence", despite incriminating tapes or films. Not surprisingly, he was angry that his colleagues daily risked their lives to capture terrorists only to find that, when the case came to court, they



Susan Phoenix, at the scene of her husband's crash with fellow officers

walked free thanks to legal niceties. An undeclared war was being fought and the Government and the courts should have acted accordingly.

As to the peace process, Phoenix applauded any dialogue but remained suspicious that Sinn Fein and the Army Council of the IRA had too many people in common for comfort. The lines of command were conveniently blurred. He believed that the ceasefire, much talked-of but not yet in place at the time of his death, was called only because Sinn Fein/IRA recognized that Phoenix and his fellow officers knew too much, bringing the armed struggle to an impasse. They needed breathing space, time to rearm and refinance. "More than a million came in from America after the ceasefire."

Equally, Dr Phoenix concedes, following the loss of 29 specialist intelligence officers, the Government too needed time. "And the crash left the RUC emotionally drained. A whole corridor at RUC Headquarters was wiped out. You can't fight on in that condition."

Paradoxically perhaps, she believes Gerry Adams is sincere in his quest for peace but, like her husband, finds "the lauding of him" distasteful. "He's very presentable, isn't he," she agrees, drawing a contrast with Ian Paisley and David Trimble, whose public demeanour never fails to suggest manic extremism. "Like so many of these people, he's never had a job," she observes, worrying about the future in a peaceful Ireland for a generation who have known no proper job, for whom violence has been their *raison d'être*. "There needs to be a retraining programme."

A Protestant born in the North, Ian Phoenix grew up with friends of both religions and neither. Susan is English, C of E — they met in Aldershot when he was a young recruit and she was training to be a nurse. "But religion wasn't an issue for us or for any of our friends." It still isn't, she believes, for most "ordinary" people. Phoenix believed that a government with courage and "vision" could have solved the problems of Northern Ireland in the late Sixties, before they got out of hand, before the Army went in, before the IRA regrouped and rearmend, firing the first shots in an endless tit-for-tat turf war. Like most sensible people, he recognized that Ulster's Catholic minority had a number of very valid grievances. "He believed they should have granted the Catholics their civil rights and then dealt with the Protestant arguments. The last 26 years need not have happened."

The Phoenixes discussed the poli-

tics and the passions of the general situation but not the minutiae of Ian's job. Close friends and family knew what he did but security inevitably meant being economical with the truth in all other cases. Jack Holland, the journalist and author who first met the family after they rented his Italian holiday home, was told he sold hearing aid equipment — an easy lie, since working with the deaf is Dr Phoenix's domain. He only discovered the truth from television reports of the crash.

Like most people who live daily with the possibility of violent death, Ian Phoenix was philosophical about it. "But he never went out without we kissed goodbye. We knew every day could be his last." Relentlessly sociable, he was always inviting friends and colleagues to lunch and it was not unusual for twenty people to gather round their table on a Sunday. "I remember I once said to him, 'We can't keep doing this — we're broke!' He replied that they'd be there for me one day, and they were. He often said such strange things."

He had planned to retire this year, perhaps to France, and intended to write a book. He always told his wife that, if anything happened to him, she should do it for him.

No details

Voluntarily, as she had not signed the Official Secrets Act, Dr Phoenix submitted the completed manuscript to the D-Notice Committee. "They were absolutely horrified," the book's publisher, Roland Philipps, remembers. Unable to go into the detail of their worries and objections, the report stated its concerns in blanket terms and made it clear they'd prefer the book not be published. But Hodder and Dr Phoenix were determined and the latter was able to use old networks to discuss the problems in detail with two RUC officers, who travelled to France where she was on holiday to go through the manuscript line-by-line. "We took out anything that might endanger someone's life. We didn't take out anything simply because it would embarrass the Government," she explains.

In London on her way back to Northern Ireland, Dr Phoenix will return to her home and her memories. For the moment, she has friends a-plenty, but her two children are grown and working away. She admits to an uncertain future. "It may not be possible for me to live there once the book comes out. I don't know what I'll do; perhaps go to France." As to her own work, "that requires giving a lot out emotionally and I'm not able to do that at present." For the moment she is focusing on the book, stealing herself for the criticism that will rain down on her from all quarters, not least the security services who will be critical of Phoenix's having kept a journal and scornful of "the poor little widow" for venturing into a men's world, for having opinions.

"We'll wait and see. I'm not bitter. I don't regret what Ian did. Neither of us wanted a nine to five job — we wanted excitement, challenges. Writing the book has not been easy but I'm glad I've done it. It's been constructive, which is what Ian would have wanted."

Phoenix: Policing the Shadows is published by Hodder & Stoughton on 7 November, price £17.99.