

headscarf. Aunt Maggie's room was too tiny to hold us all in comfort, but we squeezed into every available space and I found myself hedged into a corner next to a glass-fronted cabinet containing ornaments and gifts from many a seaside resort. Everyone was concerned about Jim. Jim should have met us at The Bell but had gone to the wrong pub. He lived off sick-pay laced with whisky. He turned up eventually and Bill asked him to sing for us. Jim liked singing; he stood up and delivered *Begin the Beguine* like a Fifties crooner, with a sob in his voice and violent arm movements.

Aunt Maggie said very little. 'What's all this about?' she kept muttering. No one answered, so I said, 'Bill wanted me to meet his family.' She looked even more bemused. At 10 o'clock Bill declared he was hungry, so abandoning Aunt Maggie and friends, Jim the crooner, and Joe and Jean (who I'm sure expected to be invited), we went off to the Peking Inn. It was crowded and we had not reserved a table, but that sort of thing doesn't bother Bill. They'd find him a table while we had a drink at the bar. Bill spotted, seated at a table across the restaurant, an Italian family whose wedding he had attended the day before. He sent them over a bottle of Bollinger. Such a gesture could not go unanswered. The Italians sent him a bottle of Bollinger in return. Bill told me about his mother. As soon as he had started to make money, he put her on the payroll and each week would send her 'a wage' in a brown envelope. When she died, it fell to him to clear the house. In a wardrobe he found a pile of unopened brown envelopes, containing thousands of pounds. 'She thought my luck would not last and that one day I'd be on my uppers and then she'd be able to give it back to me.'

Ray had said it would be an unusual evening. It turned out to be a bizarre and unforgettable evening. It showed how some of those who start life with a foot not even near the bottom rung of the ladder succeed in a struggle to the top - if wealth enough to lunch at Le Gavroche can be seen as a measure of success. It showed how those who have scraped out of poverty view those who have been left behind. It showed that the nature of poverty has changed from growth-denying lack of food and a bed in a cupboard, to life in a block of flats and afternoons searching for lost golf balls or other flirtations with the black economy. In all it showed how we make progress slowly, gaining much and losing something with every step. I treasure the little schoolbook on the tobacco trade: a symbol of the spirit of Glasgow, warm and thoughtful, proud and eager to display its best profile. This southerner was delighted to discover a Glasgow miles better than I ever expected.

Chapter 5

Northern Ireland: Bugger Strongbow!

I made a pig's ear of getting to Northern Ireland. The obvious route was to take the bus down the coast to Ayr where I could change buses for Stranraer and hop on the ferry to Larne. But I'd heard talk of Ulster yachtsmen sailing over to Arran and to Campbeltown for the weekend and from this I'd hatched the idea of hitching a ride back with one of them. There was some logic behind this whim. In my mind this was how the first settlers arrived in Ireland - from Scotland by boat some 8,000 years ago. If you glance at the map, there's a leg of Scotland at the Mull of Kintyre which is stretched out towards an arm of Ireland at Fair Head in County Antrim; the distance between the two is a mere thirteen miles. I wanted to travel to Ireland by the oldest, shortest route. My efforts to achieve this were considerable; I enlisted the help of several friends and acquaintances and one even broadcast an appeal on Radio Clyde. All to no avail. Finally, I got on the bus to Ayr, changed for Stranraer and got on the ferry with an ungracious sigh of resignation and the smug thought that the weather was poor and the forecast so bad that few if any yachtsmen would be tempted across the North Channel for some days.

My hands warmed by a polystyrene cup of coffee, I got out my diary. It was empty. I knew no one in Northern Ireland. I had no plans, and only one appointment - with the Tourist Board for a lesson in religious geography. This may seem a cavalier way to approach a place where a murderous little war had been going on since 1968, but it was deliberate. In the coming weeks I was simply going to let things happen. I wanted Northern Ireland to reveal itself in the way it chose. Millions of words have been written by those who arrived with preconceived notions and laden address books. What could I add to the struggle whose seeds had been sown some 800 years before, when an adventurous Norman baron called Strongbow had sailed across

from Wales and alerted the attention of the English to the possibility of plastering the mark of ownership upon Ireland?

Strongbow, who arrived in 1169, was not one of King Henry's men, and the king was not best pleased to see this upstart showing such initiative. He sent his men hotfoot to Ireland; it was the first time the English had concerned themselves with Irish affairs. Henry's men began to take the land and turn the Irish into tenants, and what he started other kings and queens continued. The north showed the greatest resistance. One of the last of the great Irish Gaelic chieftains to kick up a fuss about being colonized was Hugh O'Neill and his neighbour Hugh O'Donnell. They lost their fight and fled, forfeiting their lands. The English rubbed their hands in glee and began planting Ulster with English and Scottish settlers in order to stabilize English rule. Such plantations had been tried before and failed, but this time the attempt was on a much firmer financial footing. The Irish were shoved into less fertile land to fester with resentment until they were ready to fight. And fight they did, with violence and atrocities that live in the minds of Protestants today. Some argue that 12,000 incomers were killed. Eight years later, in 1649, Oliver Cromwell arrived to avenge the atrocities of 1641, which he did with notable success. A pattern was thus set for the Oppression of Ireland, a pattern of violence and counter-violence that continues to this day.

The average Brit turns away from the mess; doesn't want to know; wishes the little island would float away. But the Irish question lingers on, a running sore, draining politicians and political parties. Perhaps it is true that Lloyd George had no option but to partition Ireland in 1921. Looking back from this distance it seems such a daft idea, but at the time the compromise must have pleased more people than it offended. It was certainly a sop to the Protestants, whom the British dared not abandon but clearly did not want, otherwise they would have been happy to govern Northern Ireland from Westminster. But they would not; responsibility was devolved to Stormont and British political parties refused to accept members from Northern Ireland or to contest elections there. And a blind eye was turned when Stormont abolished proportional representation for local elections and set about gerrymandering to keep Protestants in total control. And a blind eye was turned when the Protestants started discriminating against Catholics.

When the Troubles (as we call them) broke out again in 1968, they centred on civil rights. The Catholics demanded their share of housing, of jobs, of everything. With Stormont disbanded in 1972, much has been achieved in the area of civil rights. The price has been high.

There are British soldiers crawling everywhere. It is now a bloody fight with fear and loathing in the hearts of those who hurl bombs and fire guns; loathing of British rule; fear of Catholic domination from a united Ireland. A solution seems as far away as ever. The latest idea, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, gives Dublin a say in the affairs of the North. The Protestant majority is not pleased; they reckon it shows that violence pays; that the IRA and INLA campaign has resulted in an agreement which brings a united Ireland that much closer. Daily through the newspapers and nightly via television screens another painful episode in the appalling history of this island and of this province seeps into homes across the nation – into humble homes and haughty homes. What's the difference? All eyes are blank with compassion fatigue and ears are blocked by incomprehension. If they knew a little history they might mutter, 'Bugger Strongbow,' and feel better.

Are these seats free? May we sit here? Two youthful English voices slid into the plastic-covered benches, one in front of me and the other beside me. Richard and Alison come from Hull and were heading for Belfast in the hope of a job and a new life. Richard had worked there before, for ten months as a volunteer with a Presbyterian church doing good works with young and old. He'd then gone to Newcastle University to read history and economics and ended up working for General Accident. Insurance in Hull sounded dull. Teaching in Hull sounded worse. Alison, having read French and German at Newcastle and completed a diploma in education, decided within months of reaching the classroom that she hated teaching. The Presbyterian Church in Belfast had been given money by the Manpower Services Commission to set up a centre for the unemployed youth. Richard was hoping for a job there.

'Would the centre be solely for Protestant youth?' I asked.

'Yes, it would. We'd be happy for it to be for both, but that isn't how it works. It has to be for one or the other.'

'But there's more unemployment among the Catholics than Protestants, isn't there?'

'Yes, the figures are higher, but not in a dramatic way. That's propaganda. And anyway what do you expect . . . Roman Catholics have much larger families, and that's got to be part of the explanation.'

To Alison and Richard, the challenge of Belfast was preferable to the sterility of Hull. Christian goodwill was needed, so they thought, in Belfast, and yes, there might be violence, but the fabric of life was still intact. Muggings and theft and burglary were not daily occurrences, and people knew each other and cared for each other. I didn't know what to make of this conversation. Had I met do-gooders

deserting pagan England in favour of a tortured Belfast where their Christian beliefs still meant something and where they could drink deeply of a strong, pious brew that had caused so much anguish? Or had I simply been given a tiny warning that Belfast had hidden attractions that it might be willing to reveal if I were prepared to listen?

Alison and Richard offered me a lift from Larne to Belfast which I gratefully accepted, only to realize I had forgotten where I was staying. This caused much embarrassment; anywhere else it might be cause for amusement, but in Belfast I felt it was tantamount to suspicious behaviour. Perhaps they thought I didn't want them to know where I was staying. I asked them to drop me at the railway station, where one phone call would revive my memory.

On the ferry I had silently wondered how long I would be in Belfast before becoming aware of the Troubles; a couple of hours, a couple of days? A couple of minutes was the answer. As soon as I set foot in the station a security guard pounced on my luggage and prodded it with a metal detector.

'I only want to use the phone,' I volunteered.

'Sure, hop over the barrier and I'll look after your luggage.'

Seconds later I had the information I needed and went back to claim my luggage.

'Where can I get a taxi?'

'If you hang on for five minutes, they'll be pouring in here to meet the train from Dublin. I'll catch the first driver for you. Would you like a cigarette while you wait?' And above him on a closed-circuit television you could see the taxis turn into the station forecourt, park, and drivers walk up the steps to the single doors into the station. This was Belfast and there would be no avoiding the Troubles.

Within ten minutes I was in Beaumont Lodge, Stranmillis Road, being greeted by the owner, Mrs Valerie Kidd. It turned out to be the best b. & b. of my whole trip. Instead of being, as I'd imagined it, facing the street, upright and dreary, this b. & b. was at the end of a long winding drive; a modern house, some twenty years old, open-plan and with the bedrooms arranged along a gallery at one end. There was only a handful of rooms; there was always a log fire burning in the grate in the evening and, alongside, a trolley to make tea. It was like being in a home (which is just as b. & b. should be) with a fascinating array of other guests.

I watched the news that night with two of them, a couple from Canada, elderly, making a final pilgrimage to the places of their birth. He was an unattractive man, a lorry driver who had never owned a car.

He was born in the south of England; she was born in Belfast. She was silent; he moaned the whole time.

'No one ever asks what we think. They talk to us, but they never ask us any questions. In Canada, there would be a conversation all the time.'

'In Canada, if you want a phone number you just pick up the phone.'

'You can do the same here,' I suggested. 'Try it.'

'She,' he said, referring to his wife, 'can't remember the name of the people.'

'I rather doubt if a telephone company in Canada could help you there.'

I laughed. He didn't.

We watched the news. The IRA had floated death threats at all those servicing security forces in Northern Ireland. In return, the Ulster Freedom Fighters had issued, via a video cassette delivered to broadcasting organizations, a counter-threat to all Catholics working in Protestant areas, warning them to stay away until the IRA lifted its threat. Tom King, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, had something to say about this. He said that the Loyalists were responding foolishly to IRA provocation. Other Protestants said that the UFF were blood brothers to the IRA and were trying to push the community into all-out war. The UFF message was delivered by a hooded man in a paramilitary dress, flanked by three masked men displaying arms. A portion of the video was shown on the news bulletin. Northern Ireland commandeered twelve minutes of the news. This was no doubt because the marching season was in full swing, the marching season being the time of year when those who turn away for most of the time tune in for a bit of lusty sectarianism. I'd missed 12 July, when Protestants march throughout the province to commemorate their deliverance from Popery. The biggest and noisiest march takes place in Belfast, ever grateful to Protestant King William for usurping Catholic King James. Marching is a sport; the game is for the Protestants to try and march through Catholic areas to show who is boss, and for the police (and the army) to do their damndest to keep them out. In return, the Catholics will also march to commemorate the introduction of internment, but it isn't quite the same. It's a protest rather than a celebration, and there are no hard hats and white gloves. The next big march would be in Londonderry on 12 August to celebrate the anniversary of the relief of that city from siege, and I was determined to see it. Between the two dates, the political temperature always rises and Protestant blood was higher than usual because of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

After the news came a repeat of the series *The Thorn Birds*, a mighty popular tall story in which a Roman Catholic priest is seduced. When it was first shown, the episode in which the seduction took place broke all ratings records. If I remember correctly it happened on or near a beach in Australia. The priest was played by Richard Chamberlain and Rachel Ward was the temptress. The nation was immobilized and when the episode ended the Electricity Board could hardly cope with the sudden rush of demand as kettles were switched on, and the Water Board reported a similar surge as lavatories were flushed in unison across the land.

The next morning I went to the Tourist Board for my lesson in religious geography and for advice on how to get where I wanted to go – around the north coast to Londonderry and then south in a sweep back to Belfast. And that was religious geography lesson one: London got added to Derry at the time of the Plantation of Ulster and the mainly Catholic city does not like to hear itself referred to as Londonderry. Yes, but how was I to know whether I was talking to a Protestant or a Catholic?

'Call it Derry all the time; you'll be more often right than wrong. Besides, the Protestants are not nearly so offended to hear it called Derry as the Catholics are to hear it called Londonderry.'

It was here that I met Sharon McAllister, who offered to drive me to Derry. It isn't that far, a couple of hours by the direct route, but she was offering the slow route and the chance to stop wherever I wished, untroubled by bus timetables. My hesitation was fleeting; the thought of having the company of a vivacious twenty-three-year-old was irresistible.

But first I wanted a glimpse of Belfast, just the city centre, the rest could wait until my return. I thought half an hour of desolation, of security checks, of barricades and barbed wire would be quite enough. I saw it as the sort of place to which people came grudgingly to shop and left with all speed. That may have been the picture ten years ago, but the 1980s have seen millions of pounds pumped into Belfast. The barricades are there, cordoning off the main streets. They went up in the 1970s to stop the car bomb attacks. Now no cars are allowed: the area has been 'pedestrianized' and prettied, with hanging baskets and with benches where shoppers can linger and chat. The centre of Belfast on that day was alive and attractive, bustling; no one rushed in and out grudgingly; they strolled and gossiped and sat and ate ice-creams. The shop windows were enticing; the shops were full and several times when I held out my handbag to security staff they smiled and waved me through. They are there to make people feel better. The citizens of

Belfast are so used to them they'd feel exposed without them. I stopped and stared at the barricades and watched as people manoeuvred past them without even a glance. They might have been lamp posts for all the impact they had on those who saw them daily.

My eye caught Micky Marley's horsedrawn roundabout outside Burton's – he's been there for years and is now a listed sight. Then I strolled on to Arthur Square which had a bandstand in the middle being used at that moment not for music making, but as a punks' meeting place; a couple fought each playfully while others jeered between mouthfuls of crisps. I sat on a bench and watched the neon strip advise me to buy vodka, 7-Up, Coke and Budweiser in between telling me the time. A man in a plum-coloured velvet jacket sat down next to me and started to hum. I began to draw a little sketch of the bandstand.

'You on holiday,' said the man in the plum jacket.

'Yes.'

'This used to be called the Cornmarket, used to sell cattle here, they did. Interesting, isn't it? It's history. Where are you going?'

I told him I was heading for the north coast.

'Oh, you must go south. You must go to the Mourne Mountains, it's a beautiful spot. Newcastle is my favourite.'

I told him I'd try to get there.

'You look smart, you know that.'

'Thank you.'

'No, I mean up here,' he said tapping his head with a finger.

I thanked him again.

'You been to college? Yes, I thought so. I've watched you writing in a notebook.'

'And what do you do?'

'I'm unemployed. I used to work in a car park, but I've been unemployed for eighteen months. There isn't much work for a man of fifty-seven. It's OK on a nice day. I can come here for a walk. I live at the top of the Falls Road. Otherwise it's the telly. There's no hope for them,' he said, jerking his head toward the bandstand where the youths had now stopped fighting and were eating apples. 'They'll end in jail.'

'It'll rain before tonight,' he said, looking at the sky and then around the square where he spotted a friend called Harry carrying a huge stick of French bread. They wandered off together and I turned back to my notebook.

'You writing a love letter?' asked another passer-by, and I began to think my notebook attracted too much attention. A huge van pulled up. I was surprised to see a van at all, let alone one so big. The driver caught my eye and winked.

'They'll end in jail,' he'd said. Northern Ireland has the highest unemployment rate in the UK, around 22 per cent. It also has the highest infant-mortality rate and the highest housing-unfitness rate. It also has a low-wage economy with some 23 per cent living on incomes under £50 a week, compared to 11 per cent in the UK, and yet the essentials of life – food, fuel and clothing – cost more, particularly fuel. You don't hear much about this side of Northern Ireland; the media is consumed by the violence; they haven't time for the poverty. Besides, you don't see it in the streets; you aren't shocked by it. Poverty in the 1980s is hidden. There are no bare feet, no begging, no match-girls. Poverty hides in high-rise blocks, with dark, ill-lit stairways and a television flickering in the main room. Poverty in Northern Ireland means having electric storage heaters you cannot afford to use. You'll have a fridge because food must be stored and you'll have a washing-machine and a dryer because you won't have a garden. And you'll have a television because you can't afford to go out. You stay at home falling into debt over the fuel bills and the hire-purchase on the washing-machine.

The people of Northern Ireland have been much studied, but it is rarely the effects of deprivation that catch the researcher's eye. It is the violence. It is the 'Lost Generation': the young people who have grown up knowing nothing other than violence. How has it affected them? You'd expect the answer to be obvious: badly and deeply. But the research from Queen's University, Belfast does not show this. For a start it shows that most people in Northern Ireland have escaped direct exposure to the violence; that twice as many die in road accidents each year as at the hand of bullets and bombs. And that those who have been directly exposed tend to come from the most deprived areas; areas of poverty, of over-crowding and of unemployment. The researchers conclude that the psychological impact of poverty is far greater than the psychological impact of living in a conflict-ridden community. A survey of maladjusted children showed that 13 per cent had problems caused by the Troubles and 81 per cent had problems caused by parents divorcing or separating. An analysis of suicide cases showed that failure in personal relationships was way ahead of any other trigger.

An outsider can be forgiven for finding this surprising. There have, after all, been some irresponsible bits of journalism. *Newsweek* for example proclaimed one week that the use of tranquillizers in the 1970s had tripled in Northern Ireland. Of course it had, doctors everywhere during that period were prescribing them as if they were Smarties, and there were many countries like Holland and Iceland, trouble-free

countries, where they swallowed many more. Also, anti-depressants and sleeping pills were used less often in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK – what's to be made of that? There was also some early research that suggested that when the conflict came to an end there would have to be a massive effort to rehabilitate Northern Ireland's young people. 'Without that the children of Northern Ireland, those who survive physically, those who do not emigrate, will be militaristic automatons incapable of participating in their own destiny.' This piece of research by someone called Field has been much questioned. It is of course true that people in Northern Ireland, both young and old, have become used to violence, they accept it as the norm – Saracens on the streets and soldiers with sub-machine guns, teenagers with petrol bombs and tiny tots throwing stones. They've come close to thinking that violence is an acceptable way of achieving one's aim. For the moment, however, there is obvious comfort to be derived from a body of research that shows that the psychological health of the population, both adults and children, has not been adversely influenced because they happen to live in war-torn Northern Ireland. Outsiders may equate Northern Ireland with violence, but residents see that economic deprivation is far more significant. It is not a message that reaches the outside world.

If Sharon MacAllister is anything to go by, the research is correct. She talked with ease about her life and, like all good talkers, she has the kind of confidence that enables her to add details without ever feeling that she must race through the outline for fear of boring the listener. She remembers little about the Troubles. She recalls her journeys to school when she hid behind a hedge if she felt threatened, in much the same way as other kids must recount playground bullying: an unpleasant but inevitable part of life. She was considered to live in a 'deprived area' and therefore taken on holiday to Scotland and Wales, but she does not see herself as deprived, merely as coming from an area where the Troubles were bad. When she first talked about her disrupted childhood I felt suspicious. I thought maybe she was playing down something too painful to acknowledge openly, or that she simply might be lying. The Irish have a way with lies; they don't call them lies, they simply like to tell people what they think they want to hear. However, in the end I came to accept her acceptance of the extraordinary as the ordinary. Scarred she did not seem to be, even though religious differences had touched both her personal and her professional life.

An early boyfriend had turned out to be a Catholic but, she told me, no ordinary Catholic – a member of the INLA, who phoned one day

announcing that he was abandoning the relationship because, as she was a Protestant, it could lead nowhere. Furthermore, her attempts to become a journalist had been thwarted when, having been offered a job, she was subsequently told that the Fair Employment rules dictated that the job ought to go to a Catholic. So it was given to a Catholic whom she believed to be less well qualified. Such positive discrimination is the only way in which Catholics are going to catch up after years of being cold-shouldered. The Fair Employment rules have much improved the lot of middle-class Catholics, particularly in government and government-related jobs, but working-class Catholics have not benefited to the same extent; unemployment among Catholics is still high and there are still major firms and some entire industries employing only Protestants. To improve the progress of redressing the imbalance the rules have been tightened. Sharon accepted her failure to get the newspaper job with good grace. She wasn't totally committed to a career in journalism and thought she might go to America for a while just to see what it is like.

The road north out of Belfast, along the Antrim coast, is beautiful. The shore is rocky, the cliffs are white, the beaches empty even though the sea was smooth and calm after days of heaving waves and sickening clouds. I began to collect wayside slogans: 'Ulster says No' (referring to the Anglo-Irish Agreement) and 'Belfast Still Needs Jesus' adorned the wayside. We stopped for coffee at Carnlough, where the tiny white limestone harbour was full of pretty boats and where Frank O'Neill keeps a glorious hotel called the Londonderry Arms, which, since it is only forty-five minutes' drive from the centre of Belfast, provided a popular weekend escape for city dwellers. O'Neill seemed a little downcast. Business was right down since the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

'People are thinking they dare not leave their homes for too long. They are more influenced by what they see on TV than reality. There are moments of isolated violence, but on television it seems like a blanket danger. People say to themselves, "Am I right, or is the media right?" and not knowing the answer they stay at home. Foreign tourists stay away too, but then you can't expect them to realize that life goes on in Northern Ireland. It's the hesitation of the locals that bothers me.'

We drove to Cushendun, a village preserved totally by the National Trust for its Cornish-style cottages and because it is the home of the smallest pub in Northern Ireland. It was closed. Randall McBride has a habit of opening when he feels like it and, obviously, this Saturday lunchtime he wasn't feeling like it. Or else he sensed that everyone in the village would be busy with The Wedding. And so they were. The

service was over and the guests were heading for the reception. A group of them, dressed in all manner of Sunday-best finery, had stopped at the local store and were sitting on the wall eating ice-creams. Costly white weddings are much in fashion; you need to name the day a year in advance if you want to hold the reception at the place of your choice. John Masefield found a wife in Cushendun. Outside the village, we came across our first road-block. At least, I thought it was a road-block from the number of RUC officers carrying long guns. 'SMGs,' said Sharon. 'Sub-machine-guns. A common sight.' As we crawled forward in the line of traffic Sharon decided it was a road accident. It turned out to be a diversion. The Ulster Rally was taking place and certain roads had been cleared. To close roads for such an innocent reason using armed policemen was not something my eyes could take for granted.

As we headed towards Ballycastle, I saw a sign saying Corrymeela and suggested a detour. The Corrymeela community, idyllically sited on a headland overlooking the Atlantic and surrounded by farmland, has had its share of publicity. Here since 1965, a group of Christians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, have been working to create a meeting place for those who need to retreat from the divided society; a place where they could rest or talk or both. Ray Davey, who was a Presbyterian chaplain at Queen's University, was the leader of the movement and many students joined the early venture. It is still one of the few places where Protestant and Catholic children can spend some time together, in contrast to their daily lives where their schools are segregated and their homes too.

We drove up and walked in. There was no one around, but within minutes a girl appeared and asked who we were. I said that we were passers-by on the road to Derry and simply wanted to look around. 'Good,' said the girl. 'I'll find someone to guide you,' and out bounced Anne. 'You're my friend for life,' she said. 'You've got me off the washing-up. Where shall we start? Right here, I think. This notice-board ...' The games-mistress from Reading kept up the games-mistress approach to life for some time as we wandered around the half-deserted place. It was Saturday, change-over day; one group had already left and another was awaited. Two thoughts remain with me from that visit; one was the way in which we were accepted without question. The fact that we had shown enough interest to stop was enough. No further questions were asked or needed. And secondly, when I discovered that Anne had been giving up part of her holiday each summer for ten years, I asked what good she thought it did. The children had fun together and what happened when they got home?

The games-mistress replied: 'I don't know. We don't know how much good it does. We don't make claims. All I can tell you is that it has an influence on the volunteers, people like me who keep coming back year after year, hoping that little by little we can change people's attitudes towards one another.'

Our final stop on the slow road to Derry was at the Giant's Causeway. It is of course a huge tourist attraction and thus the sort of place I'm usually more than happy to miss, but there are some tourist attractions with the power to make me feel guilty for being such a poor tourist, and this was one of them. Anyhow, I fancied a long walk, a brisk trot along the cliffs. It didn't happen that way; the weather was not good. Indeed, it was so chilly that as we motored along I noticed smoke belching out of chimneys, proving that those inside were huddled around the fire to keep warm. So I settled for a short walk and a long gawp at thousands of strangely symmetrical basalt columns which jut out of the sea, looking at first glance like stylishly squared off organ pipes, or a daring display of long, thin cigarette packets. The books tell you that the Causeway was the result of volcanic activity, but I prefer the legend that it was built by an Irish giant called Finn MacCool so that he could travel dry-footed across the sea to Scotland.

In Derry I expected to find a march to commemorate the introduction of internment. There had been one in Belfast and I'd been told there was to be one that Sunday in Derry. So, as we drove into town where Sharon was to leave me later that night, we decided to ask the way to my hotel and find out about the march. It was excessively quiet; there were no people walking in the streets and few cars on the road. We spotted an unmarked police car and decided to follow it until it stopped, which it did outside a police station, a sandbagged, barricaded, wired-over block of concrete and brick. The policemen knew nothing about 'a march', but they guided us to the Everglades, an hotel on the Waterside, the Protestant side of the River Foyle. As we approached the hotel we saw a lone army vehicle parked in a lay-by and pulled in. Sharon got out of the car and, as she did so, the soldier closed the door of his vehicle and wound up the window, finally speaking to her from the narrowest of slits. He knew nothing of a march. Clearly our information was incorrect, but having nothing better to do, we decided to go to the Bogside, the Catholic side, and check. Sharon did not wish to take her car and so we hired a taxi. Dessie the driver knew nothing about a march.

'Youse reporters?' he asked. 'Yes,' I replied. From that he seemed to know the ropes and the road, through which he sped at enormous speed, squealing around corners. In the Bogside we found a funeral,

but no march. In Creggan we found neither, but on driving towards an army patrol I unthinkingly suggested he pull up so that I could ask.

'You'll do no such thing. I have to work around here.' When the British Army first arrived in Northern Ireland they were welcomed by the Catholics; it was the severity of the Protestant RUC towards the Catholics that had contributed to the breakdown of law and order in 1969. The army then were seen as 'neutral' and welcomed. Now the IRA had made it quite clear that they did not wish the Catholic community to have anything to do with the security forces, and that included talking to them.

Sharon suggested we give up the hunt and call on some friends of hers. Dessie asked for the phone number of the house and said if he heard anything about a march, he'd call us.

Only two members of the five-strong King family were at home. Dougie, a former boyfriend of Sharon's, was in Liverpool. His mother and one of his sisters were on holiday together in England. Deirdre, another sister, was at home with father King who suffered from emphysema, and was never far away from a little machine that helped him breathe. He was watching the racing on television. An enormous fire filled the grate. Deirdre, a graduate of business studies who worked as a civil servant, had just returned from Greece, golden brown, full of her travels and delighted and excited to welcome unexpected visitors. After tea and gossip, Deirdre suggested that she show me the Bogside and Creggan area which she knew well, and she called up a girlfriend, Grainne, in order that we should have a car.

I was much pleased; my dash through these areas by taxi had revealed little except empty streets and a general greyness, which tends to be the tone of all too many council-housing estates. The streets were still empty, eerily so. Occasionally a group of children played together in the gutter, on the join between the pavement and the road, which holds an inexplicable fascination for a certain age-group. Occasionally there were soldiers to be seen on foot, walking down the centre of streets. They were boy soldiers indeed; they looked so young. Only a few years before they'd have been hogging the gutter too. They wore camouflage. What on earth is the point of camouflage against grey stone houses and blocks of flats?

'It's always like this on a Sunday. Dead. You come back tomorrow and it will all look quite different,' said Grainne as we slid into Creggan, an area she declared had once been recognized as the cream of council estates. But not any more. I filled my notebook with more slogans: 'Lizzy Take Your Pigs Home'; 'RUC keep out'; 'Smash H Block'. But though my eyes and my pen were busy, my emotions did

not become engaged until we reached the Bogside and the obelisk announcing, 'You are Now entering Free Derry.' Everyone knows this sign; we've seen it often enough on television. There is a grass bank to one side, a pub to another and all around dreary housing bearing the scars of war. The flats seemed the worst, neglected, vandalized, sloshed with paint: 'Brits Out: Up the Republic'. The lamp posts were painted green, white and orange. I sank into the back seat of the car and blinked and was silent. The dereliction in the film *1984* haunted me for days; the Bogside may stay with me forever. The memorial to Bloody Sunday had a small pile of smouldering ashes in front of it. It was here on 30 January 1972 that thousands defied a ban on a civil-rights march. It was here on that day that thirteen civilians were killed when the army decided to break up the gathering.

We can never be certain what happened that day. Eye-witnesses say that the paratroopers jumped from armed cars and shot straight into the crowd; the army and the report on the incident by Lord Widgery claim that the army were *returning* sniper fire and did not start the riot, although Widgery did condemn a number of soldiers for firing without justification. The point according to the British press was that the march should not have taken place. When the ban was ignored there was bound to be trouble. To the Catholics of the Bogside, thirteen of their number had been murdered by British paratroopers. The small pile of smouldering ashes, like a homemade eternal flame, filled me with gloom at the thought that mankind can be so stupid.

Grainne announced that she was heading for the Fountain, a Protestant enclave within the Catholic belt. I registered nothing for a moment, my mind still among the ashes, but within five minutes I'd noticed that she had changed. Her resolve lasted six minutes.

'Look, have a quick glimpse, will you, I don't feel comfortable.' I looked out at houses bearing crimson-coloured flags, crimson bunting across the streets; and at one house on which a replica of the crown perched over the porch, shielding the front door.

'What's the matter?' I asked in all innocence.

'I just feel uncomfortable. This is a Protestant area and as we are the only car around they are bound to look at us.'

'Fair enough, but what are we doing that's wrong? How could they possibly tell that a Catholic is driving this car?'

'Maybe they can't, but I don't feel right. They don't know us, and that's enough to make us look suspicious.'

We went and cheered ourselves up with ice-creams. It was Italian ice-cream and delicious. I think it was the only shop open in Derry that day and it was about to close.

That evening we met again at my hotel for a drink. The Everglades seemed to be the favoured Sunday spot. The bar spilled over into the lobby and it was impossible to move through the crowd to get a drink. Derry had obviously decided to celebrate the ending of a gloomy Sunday. The atmosphere was excellent, conversation nearly impossible and after awhile, as it got close to closing time, Grainne suggested a trip over the border. I was much enjoying Derry at play and eagerly agreed to the three mile ride to the Point Inn, a huge disco that opened three nights a week. It didn't need to open more. One glance at the crowds revealed that the owner could make more than enough money from three days.

'No one will ask you to dance, Linda. Here the men - and they are all mostly from Derry - will eye you for a year before asking you to dance!'

'What if I ask one of them?'

'Joking? You wouldn't dare! No one does that. It would be considered . . .'

'Yes?'

' . . . loose.'

No one did ask me to dance. Two people asked Sharon, but she said no and I guessed that might have been to keep me company or because she was dispirited at the thought of the drive ahead of her back to Belfast. I was introduced to a friend of hers, whose name I did not catch but who looked like a young Arthur Miller and who had made considerable sums from slot machines of one kind or another. After a while he wandered back to his group and by and by, boredom drove me to stroll over and ask him if he'd like to dance.

'No,' he said. 'I rarely dance, and if I do it is slow ones and right now I just don't feel like it.'

For hundreds of years men have been asking women to dance and risking rejection. I found the experience amusing.

We were stopped at the border on our return. A cheeky policeman said: 'Youse haven't had much luck tonight, have youse,' as he peered into the car. I was about to say that there were three men in the boot, but I thought better of it.

The following day was my chance to see Derry on foot. The sun was shining; from my hotel I could look across the Foyle to Catholic Derry, to buildings rising in tiers of homes and offices until they reached the spire of St Columb's Cathedral. I set out to walk along the leafy road to Waterside edge of Craigavon Bridge, named after the first prime minister, Sir James Craig, Lord Craigavon. However, before I had gone a few yards a car pulled up beside me. Two well

dressed, well coiffed, middle-aged ladies wound down the window and said, 'Would you like a lift into town?' I said yes because to have said no would have been churlish, like refusing the drink in the Glasgow pub. The journey took a couple of minutes. There was no conversation. The two merely explained their kindness to a total stranger by saying: 'We always look as we turn out of our road to see if there is anyone around who might be heading for town.' They left me to walk around the Waterside where there are a few shops, pubs and cafés. Half an hour was enough to confirm what I already knew. The Protestants for whom these facilities were designed were just as hard-up as the Catholics on the other side.

I crossed the bridge. I had one call to make. The following day was the Derry march. Grainne and Deirdre had been stern in telling me to take care of myself, so as a precaution against God knows what, I rang the local Catholic paper and asked the editor if I might attend the march in the company of his reporter. I was, I explained, ignorant of the geography of the town and would welcome the help. He told me to stop by the office and he'd be only too happy to introduce me to the reporter. His name was Martin, he was in his mid-twenties and did not appear to relish his assignment. There was tension in the city. It might have been ghostly quiet on Sunday, but around 1 a.m. on Saturday morning there had been a gun battle between IRA gunmen and the army at Rossville Street flats, by the Bloody Sunday memorial, after which there had been a search of the area and of the flats, which had caused one woman to claim that plastic bullets had narrowly missed her young twins. As a result police and army reinforcements were being hauled in for the march. Martin and I made a rendezvous for the following day and I continued my stroll around the city.

Derry looked different; it had recovered from gloomy Sunday but still lacked the bustle of Belfast. There were people in the streets but they did not sit around gossiping or eating ice-creams, they went about their shopping and got on with 'this and that'. I found a bookshop called Bookworm and spent two hours leafing through endless books on Northern Ireland and on Derry and finally got chatting to the owners as I asked them to parcel up my purchases and send them home to London. I knew it was a Catholic bookshop, but none the less I asked whether they had a book on the Apprentice-boys march and the background to the siege.

They said *no*, which did not surprise me, but added: 'You are so close to the Apprentice-boys Hall, why don't you go over and ask them? There's bound to be plenty of people about because they are pouring in from all over the place for the march tomorrow.' He

walked, as he talked, to the door of the shop to point the way, and as he did so he spotted Tony Crowe.

'Tony, have you got time to tell this lady something about the march?'

'Sure,' said Tony after I'd explained why I was interested. For the next hour he unlocked doors to any number of musty rooms and inner sanctums, told me numerous stories, and confused me with many Masonic-sounding descriptions of chains and badges and other bits of anti-Popery armoury, claiming all the while that few people got to see what I was being shown. He was an engaging character, attractive, well informed and happy to talk. He quickly sorted out my tangled history.

In 1688 England was in the process of replacing Catholic King James with Protestant William of Orange. This, needless to say, displeased Catholic Ireland and made them afraid, so once again they were up in arms killing Protestants. Then in December 1688 Derry heard that a new garrison of King James's men was on its way to the city and the news filled the place with apprehension. James was still king, however, and it was decided that the garrison should be allowed in. But thirteen apprentice-boys – and here I stood looking at their names upon a board – disliking this decision, took things into their own hands and slammed the city gates. The siege did not begin in earnest until April, and by then starvation and disease started to weaken resolve. Fortunately, the troops of William of Orange came up the Foyle in late July – to the relief of Derry.

Tony Crowe was thirty-eight and had been a member of the Orange Order since he was a boy, but he had been inactive until recent years. Then, having seen several friends killed, he decided to take a lead in the community.

'We've got nothing to lose now. We Protestants are seen as lepers the world over. We are almost as hated and misunderstood as the Afrikaners. We've been here 350 years; this is our home and we have given much. We've created work and wealth. You've only got to look at southern Ireland to appreciate this – without the work-ethic the standard of living is that much lower; the Industrial Revolution passed them by. Besides, they are far more class-ridden in the south. No wonder we don't want to be a part of them, but then there's little point in talking about a united Ireland; *a good number of them don't want us!* Let's not pretend. I despise the British for the way they have tried to wash their hands of us, but the south are not sure they want us either. There has been little love lost between north and south from way, way back in history. The northern clans have looked more to Scotland than

they did to the south. It isn't just religion. Now, independence is the only way.'

In his case it is not just religion. His mother became what he described as an intellectual Catholic after having lived in France, and at one time he went to a Roman Catholic school, but he remained staunchly Protestant. We began to discuss what was meant by such over-worked phrases, such clichés as 'Protestant work-ethic' and 'the maintenance of a way of life', as he locked up the hall and we took a walk along the deserted city walls. He didn't get too far before our discussion was interrupted, but far enough to encourage me to think further about the division between Catholic and Protestant, to see how their belief systems affect their attitudes and thus their lifestyles. In other words, to find a reason for Catholic attitudes towards work.

To dismiss Catholics as 'lazy' is sloppy thinking. As far as I can make out Catholicism from the beginning saw work as a penalty for original sin; they saw it as an expiation for Adam's fall; a curse. They saw it as something to be done in order to get enough to live on. The urge that drives man to acquisition beyond the needs of simple sustenance was anathema. In this of course they were aligned to the ancient Greeks, who also saw work as a burden, something to be avoided wherever possible, particularly if it was monotonous. 'What is dearest to man's heart is leisure,' said Euripides.

It was the religions of the Reformation that sanctified work. The reformers caused a revolution in thinking of work as salvation. Martin Luther gave work a previously unknown dignity. Work for him was a way of serving God, and to establish the Kingdom of God on earth all men must work, all idleness must cease. To please God this work must be unflagging, disciplined and regular. 'God sent you not unto this world as unto a playhouse, but a workhouse.' John Calvin went one step further. He considered work as an antidote for anxiety over salvation; a way of driving out fears of damnation. Intense activity alone, he considered, makes religious doubts evaporate. To the early Catholics, however, being busy led men to sin; inactivity and contemplation were ways of avoiding sin. No wonder then that Protestants make good capitalists and Roman Catholics prefer cooperation to competition. No wonder there are profound differences in attitudes and lifestyles.

My discussion of these matters with Tony Crowe had been interrupted by the appearance along the city walls of a tall, athletic young man taking pictures, carrying a bag marked *Los Angeles Herald*. He was in Derry to cover the march. 'So is Linda,' said the affable Crowe, which meant that we all ended up in a nearby pub. The man who looked like a tennis player declared that his name was Michael Collins.

'Yes, it's not a sensible name to have up here, is it?' he said nervously as he caught the look that passed between Tony and me.

Michael Collins holds a hero's place in Irish history. Some describe him as an Irish Lenin. Born in West Cork in 1890, he emigrated to England in search of work and returned some ten years later in time for the uprising of 1916, after which he stayed to create 'disorder' throughout Ireland via the Irish Republican Brotherhood, with the aim of establishing an independent Ireland. In the end, Collins signed the treaty agreeing to partition, believing it was but a short step to a united free Ireland. Partition, he felt, was sure to fail and was therefore a mere hiccup. For this judgement half of those who once claimed that they were willing to die for him deserted him, and he was killed by a bullet in 1922. No one knows who fired the shot.

Michael Collins, twenty-nine and an Irish-American, had a biased view of history, and a one-sided view of contemporary events. He regaled us with his account of the previous Friday night in Belfast, where he claimed to have seen plastic bullets fired at children; where he claimed that one plastic bullet missed him by inches, even though he had the word *Press* plastered on his forehead. He had the bullet in his luggage, he said.

'They hate the press, of course, and particularly the American-Irish press, and would do anything to stop us getting at the truth of what is going on here.' I resented this kind of talk. He'd been in Northern Ireland for forty-eight hours. A meddling American with a closed mind was a more apt description than 'a journalist'. I said nothing. Tony Crowe was more than a match for him and this he came to appreciate. They squabbled over history until Collins said: 'I wish all Protestants were as reasonable and as pleasant to argue with.' Alas, the minute Tony's back was turned he added: 'All Protestants are scum, like the British. We had to fight a war to get rid of them. They never go until they are pushed.' I told him that I was only prepared to listen to such talk from those who *lived* in Ireland and I didn't much care for the views of someone who had chosen to make his life elsewhere. 'But we were forced out, my ancestors were forced out!'

'And you've chosen to stay out . . . so why not stay out completely.' He then offered to buy me a drink which I refused, but I did offer to walk over the bridge with him and point him in the direction of a number of b. & bs. I could have walked away, but to the writer unpleasant meetings are as much grist to the mill as pleasant ones.

It was 7.30. Tony had disappeared homewards, carrying his wreath for tomorrow's ceremony, and as we started to walk I spotted smoke swirling into the sky and suggested we go and find the source.

thinking that his athletic presence might come in useful if we walked into trouble.

The smoke came from bonfires being prepared in the Fountain. We walked through streets watching men in crimson jumpers erecting crimson bunting across the streets, until we came to three huge bonfires with the tricolour on top and one smaller bonfire surrounded by dirty-faced kids. The smaller bonfire was alight.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'Having a bonfire. The big ones will be lit at 11.30 and we felt like having one now.'

'What's the bonfire for?'

'To burn the flag.'

'... the flag?'

'The Catholic flag.'

There was no trouble. At the other side of the bridge two armoured vehicles were parked and soldiers with guns were roaming the streets. Michael Collins was uneasy. 'I sure dislike walking the streets looking for a place to stay.' Amazed by his inability to handle himself I took him into the pub and while he put his bags down I asked the landlord if he could recommend a place to stay. He called his wife, who picked up her cordless phone, dialled a number and called to me: '£6 per night all right?' 'Fine,' I said. 'What name shall I say it is?' 'Michael. It's not for me, it's for my friend Michael.' Michael Collins looked impressed. It was the last I saw of him.

Chapter 6

Northern Ireland: Beauty and the Beast of Intolerance

The march was to begin at 1.15. Before that there was to be a wreath-laying at the war memorial in the Diamond, and a church service at St Columb's Cathedral. For most people 1.15 was the moment. Until then, shops were open, some taxis were operating, but after that the centre of Derry would be left to the marchers – the rest of Derry would scurry away indoors.

I left my hotel at 10 a.m. to walk through the cool, cloudy morning, across the bridge once more to watch the wreath-laying and to attend the service. Seconds outside my hotel I spotted my first slit-eyed, steel-grey armoured car, gliding down the street: along this stretch of road coaches would park, bringing marchers from neighbouring towns and villages. Once over the bridge the numbers of both police and army vehicles increased. I felt conspicuous and thought that at any moment I'd be stopped and asked my business. Be that as it may, I was not going to wear a notice saying *Press* on my forehead!

Outside the Apprentice-boys Hall there were as many camera crews as there were groups of people assembling behind banners. A woman smiled at me. She was staying at the same hotel and was from Canada, part of a crew making a documentary about democracy. Towards 11 o'clock I moved to the Diamond, the war memorial, stopping to chat to a group of policemen lounging at a street corner: 'Lot of scrambled egg around here today; each more useless than the next,' they said. The wreath-laying ceremony was brief and rather un-moving. I spotted Tony easily. He was the only one with any idea how to march. The rest shuffled along, their shoulders hunched. There was a flute band; a pipe and drums, some pretty fancy uniforms, including those with kilts and plumed helmets, but also many young people in trousers and sweaters. A few shopgirls stood in doorways and there was a group of tourists seated on the pavement

in folding chairs, but on the whole the crowd was small.

As I walked to St Columb's Cathedral, no distance from the Diamond, I passed a pub called the Talk of the Town, where drinkers were spilling on to the pavement. In the church yard a bent old man with a stick said: 'You haven't seen the half of it yet.' His breath smelt of drink. A group of what I took to be members of the press sat on the low walls smoking, reluctant to go inside but anxious to get a few notes on the sermon.

It was certainly worth hearing. It was the most political I have ever heard. Hugh Ross, a Presbyterian minister from Tyrone, gave what was in essence a history lesson, to the effect that it was God's hand that in the seventeenth century had guided Protestants to this north-eastern corner; it was God's hand that had enabled the Protestants to prosper; and it was God's hand that had guided Protestants through every spot of bother since then. And of course it was God's hand that had guided the thirteen apprentice-boys and enabled them to slam the gates of the city in the faces of Roman Catholics. The boys, he said, would no doubt have been seen as the yobbos of their day – the hotheads – but they had saved Derry. Much of Europe had not been saved; much of Europe was in the hands of Popery. 'The power of the enemy is great; the wealth of the Vatican is great,' and he listed the real estate to prove the point.

The British, he went on, did not want to settle Irish terrorism for fear of Catholic opinion in Europe. 'The Protestants in Northern Ireland have never been so betrayed as by the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The English scorn us; no one understands us. And yet we were there to fight alongside the British at the Somme; we were there to fight against the Roman Catholic Mussolini.' He ended by appealing to the prime minister to give Ulster the security it deserved against Roman Catholic terrorism. Hugh Ross was no orator and I can't imagine that the congregation felt inspired on this day. Outside the press swapped notes. I went to see Martin. The sun had come out and the crowd outside the Talk of the Town was increasing by the minute. There was no need to go inside for a drink; there were stalls outside selling Harp Lager at 55 pence. It felt like a street party.

Martin and I decided to position ourselves within the Diamond, which is in fact a square from which four roads lead. Two of the roads were cordoned off; one with a huge canvas wall and the other by a line of armoured vehicles. That left one road through which the march entered the Diamond and one road through which it left. The word was that there were 10,000 marchers and that could well have been the number for the parade lasted one and a half hours, a constant stream, lowering their banners as they passed the place where wreaths had

been laid. Just as the march was beginning, an army officer in camouflage gear and with the kind of cut-glass accent provided by a spell at Sandhurst wandered up to a film crew alongside me and said: 'Are you here to report or to manufacture the news?'

No one answered.

'For the last three nights I have watched the news on television and seen manufactured stuff that put my soldiers at risk.'

The film crew remained silent.

The arrogant, antagonistic young man continued: 'Can you put your hand on your heart and say you have never manufactured stuff?'

'We're news,' said an American accent. 'We're news and we film what is in front of us. If it's not there, we cannot film it.'

A drunk came up to me. 'Do you know what the memorial commemorates? 30,000 dead. I fought in Burma. I fought for the Queen. I fought. They don't know what they are doing. Dipping their fucking flags. It's a mockery.' He said much the same thing three times over before realizing that I was not going to engage him in conversation and he weaved on past, muttering.

At one point a group of young marchers broke ranks and began jumping up in the air as they came abreast of one of the closed roads, making V-signs and shouting, 'Shoot, Shoot, Shoot to Kill'. The message was aimed at a crowd of Catholics that had assembled down the street, divided from the shouters by three rows of armoured vehicles. The Catholic crowds began to respond, but I could neither hear nor see clearly. A policeman touched my arm and invited me to stand on the wired guard of one of the vehicles. I hesitated. There was nothing to stop another officer coming along and ordering me down. He repeated the offer and I decided to take the risk because I needed the height; the extra two feet enabled me to see what was happening halfway down the street. The first line of vehicles was edging forward slowly, and like a snow plough was shovelling the Catholic crowd back into the Bogside, out of harm's way. The incident was over in minutes and we settled back to wait for the Reverend Ian Paisley, leader of the DUP, whom we knew would bring up the rear of the column of marchers. I knew when he was approaching because I could hear cheering and because the camera crews began to jostle for better positions. When Paisley appeared in view, he raised his bowler hat to the crowd. He was wearing white gloves and looked for all the world like a 'white minstrel'. It was an amusing image and I stepped forward to capture the moment with my camera. Arms swung out at me, reining me back. I don't know whose arms they were; plainclothes policemen, other marchers, other picture-takers.

'Oh, let the lady get her picture,' shouted the Reverend Ian Paisley. And he halted the march, and leaned on his check furred umbrella and smiled directly at me. I was so taken aback that my photograph is out of focus. I smiled in return. They say that Ian Paisley has great charm.

The march itself was over just before 3 p.m., and Martin and I decided to take a walk through the Bogside. It was warm now, sunless and sultry, and hundreds of people were hanging around, sitting around, strolling around. Waiting. I could feel the waiting. Martin was a little less influenced by the mood and wanted a drink, so we went to a pub and drank cider for half an hour. By the time we got back, the waiting crowd had doubled and a British Telecom van was upturned in the street, close to the sign saying 'You are now entering Free Derry'. Youths, hundreds of them, sat on the pavement with their arms around their knees. Waiting.

'They've just jumped that van and told the driver to bugger off.'

'Why didn't he put his foot down and speed away?'

'His life is worth more than a van. Telecom have told all their men that if ambushed they should abandon the vehicle and run. Happens all the time.' Hooded figures openly poured petrol, slowly, carefully and deliberately all over the upturned vehicle. There was masses of time for the police to come and stop them but that is just what the police didn't do, because that is just what the hooded figures wanted them to do. It was an act of provocation. Suddenly the whole thing went ablaze and thick black smoke swirled into the air. The crowd watched. No one attempted to move.

For ten minutes or so I watched the crowd watching the blaze. There was no chatter; the mood was menacingly quiet and still. Then, as one, the crowd started to move, without speed, but with purpose, towards the Bloody Sunday memorial.

'This is it,' said Martin.

'This is what?' I asked.

'Trouble. Now look, at the first sign, run. When I run, you run. And if you lose me, hop over the nearest wall into someone's garden and crouch down.'

I listened without understanding. 'I don't think we ought to run. Surely that looks suspicious? Let's place ourselves close to a wall now.'

Martin agreed. He was becoming agitated. A listless, dull afternoon which he had written off as a 'broken docket' – an Irish phrase meaning 'useless', like a spent betting-slip – was turning into something known to journalists as 'copy', a potential story.

We found a 'wall', a lowish garden wall to a house at the end of a terrace. A youth in jeans, with a pink knitted helmet hiding his face,

passed within a foot of me. In each hand he carried a petrol bomb. The sight mesmerized me. I persuaded Martin to follow him and we walked behind the youth until he decided to march down the centre of the road. We stood on a street corner and watched him disappear from view. Within view were half a dozen armoured police vehicles parked on a corner of waste land. On the opposite corner, a similar number of television crews had their cameras trained on the vehicles. There we waited. We waited among a thin crowd strung out along the pavement. A crack shattered the eerie silence.

'A plastic bullet,' said Martin.

'How do you know?' I asked.

'We've heard enough of them to recognize the sound.'

We waited. There was no joking, no quipping, just silence from people who are used to hanging around. After eighteen years of scenes like this it baffled me that the bystanders did not scurry away indoors and put the kettle on. Perhaps petrol bombs v. plastic bullets is the modern equivalent of gladiatorial contests or public executions. There were very few women – petrol bombs v. plastic bullets is a male sport, like football. An ambulance went past and as it did so the first of the armoured vehicles began to move, gradually gathering speed. You could see guns peeping through the slits. In front of us a handful of youths began to run. A vehicle drew up alongside them and two policemen leapt out. One of the youths tripped. He was wearing black leather and his hair was blond and swept upwards to form spikes. The police were upon him; each grabbed an arm and yanked him up from the pavement and dragged him into their van. As they did so they walloped him with their truncheons. I thought the beating was unnecessary, but then I had not seen petrol bombs being thrown at the police, which is how the incident was portrayed on television that evening. It was all over within minutes, and the police vehicles disappeared from view. Martin said they wouldn't stick around with so many television cameras present. I'd seen enough of the Bogside and suggested we went over the bridge to see what was happening on the Waterside. 'No,' he replied firmly. He was a Catholic and could not be seen on the other side. It would be too dangerous. He walked with me to the bridge, which was sealed off with white tape, and we said good-bye.

I walked across listening to the helicopters humming overhead and to the steady drone of the pipes and drums. What I found on the other side was sickening. It was drunkenness. Wherever I looked there were men drunk, or men drinking. There was vomit on the pavement outside the pub where I had gone the night before to find accommoda-

tion for Michael. The building next to it was burnt out. I had seen no drinking or drunkenness in the Bogside. I had seen Protestant drinking since soon after 10 o'clock. It was now 5 p.m. It was impossible to feel threatened by this mob, they seemed incapable. The publican was standing at the doorway of his pub. 'It'll be all right when the trains leave at 6. This lot will be gone.' The implication was that the visitors to Derry were responsible for the mess, the vomit, the drunkenness and the wrecking of the phone box. I wandered to the island in the middle of the road where several columns of police in riot helmets and shields stood in lines in front of their vehicles. From time to time a stone would be hurled in their direction; a stone or an empty lager can. The target turned to look in the direction of the missile, but appeared to accept the stones and the cans as though they were nothing more than irritating flies. In the middle of this a young couple stood, arms entwined, kissing. He wore jeans and had a camera slung over his neck; she wore white trousers and yellow shoes. It seemed to sum up the seriousness of the scene in front of me. The Derry march had turned into a drunken brawl. I turned away and walked back to my hotel.

That night at dinner two men at the next table talked loudly about the price of food; they discussed how much they were prepared to pay for lobster - £14 for a whole seemed acceptable to them. In London, they said, they were prepared to spend £80 on lunch for two people. One of them had a black eye. I asked at the desk who they were and got the answer I expected: representatives of the so-called 'popular press'. I was told that thirty-five journalists were staying in the hotel. Nothing compared to the height of the Troubles, said the man behind the desk. In those days, he said, the bar was always full of intrepid reporters who would look out across the Foyle to the Bogside and when they saw smoke rising they'd make a phone call to the RUC and then write a story.

The man with the black eye had started his food-obsessed meal with a toast: 'To the end of the annual orgy of naked triumphalism.' Is that really how he saw it? I saw it as a sad day; a day without a trace of triumph; a day tinged with hollow ritual that somehow showed all too clearly the position of Protestants in Northern Ireland. Slamming the gates on King James's men had given them a tenuous supremacy which they had clung to at all costs; it had not made them confident; it had made them fearful in the knowledge that at any time they could be toppled. Confident men do not end the day drunk; that is the behaviour of men who are insecure, threatened and defiant.

Next morning I awoke feeling weary. The adrenalin had ceased to flow and I needed a fallow day in which to recover. Two men were

outside my window noisily mending the guttering; all the newspapers had been gobbled up by the early risers. It was raining. I decided that my fallow day would be spent travelling a few hours down the road into County Fermanagh. Border country where one in ten is employed on the land, fighting against milk quotas and beef mountains. Fermanagh, I'd been told, was beautiful and could be prosperous, could become the centre of tourism once there was peace. I'd heard about a country house that had been turned into a small, cosy hotel for those who wanted to fish and shoot and ride. It was some six miles from the town of Enniskillen, which sits on an island between upper and lower Lough Erne. It sounded the perfect antidote to watching marchers. I checked the bus timetable and then rang the hotel. Arthur Stuart readily offered to meet me from the bus.

The single-decker 98 took the journey slowly, picking up and dropping any number of damp shoppers laden with plastic bags. On these local buses there is said to be ventilation and one cannot open the windows, and this made it increasingly unpleasant inside. So did the fact that people insisted on smoking in the non-smoking seats. At one time three of them were puffing away, but I decided it was too much effort to ask them to stop. It takes energy to make oneself unpopular: this was a local bus and folk would probably not take kindly to a visitor's bossiness. In any event it wasn't the only rule being broken.

There was a sign saying that passengers must not speak to the driver or distract his attention without good cause. Two pert young girls were doing just that. One perched on a thin ledge facing him and the other draped herself alongside him, her arm on his chair. They giggled and played with his left ear. I averted my gaze and, since I could no longer see through the rain-splattered windows, took to reading the advertisements: 'Have you ever been raped or sexually assaulted? Phone Derry 260 566.'

The towns of Strabane and Omagh looked bedraggled: huddled up against the weather, or the goings-on at the border, or rape or incest. Or poverty. This area has the highest unemployment rate. In Strabane it is said to be around 33 per cent, but hidden by a struggling black economy. The rate for the county is 27 per cent, as against Northern Ireland's 19 per cent. The passengers on the bus attested to this, but then passengers on buses are never a good guide. They tend to be used by the youthful poor and the elderly poor. The rest have cars.

Arthur Stuart was waiting at the bus station at Enniskillen. His house is called Jamestown and it dates from 1760, with bits added in 1820. It is in a village called Ballinamallard, which struck me as being attractive, until Arthur pointed out the boarded up RUC building

that had been bombed several months before. Arthur Stuart had been a beef farmer but he had become disenchanted with working so hard to provide another creature for a beef mountain, and had sold up and bought Jamestown with his father, who had a business selling tools and building equipment. Arthur and his young wife, Helen, wanted to create a country-house atmosphere at Jamestown, but not in a pretentious manner. While she ran the kitchen, he would take his meals with the guests who ate together at one table, and plan with them the next day's fishing.

The other two guests that first night had been married for twenty-four hours. Joanna was a student at Queen's University Belfast, reading biology, and Richard worked for Esso. 'We consider ourselves upper middle class,' she told me as we sat beside a log fire over drinks that had been laid out on a table from which we helped ourselves. Sherry in her hand, she continued. 'People always think of the Irish as poor, but this is not the case. I resent going down to London and noticing the surprise in people's faces when I talk about my skiing holidays or whatever. In fact we have a higher standard of living than you English. House prices are so low here, you see. Someone earning £15,000 a year is on a pig's back.'

Arthur Stuart's father took me on Lough Erne the next day. He owns an admiral's barge, the only one in Northern Ireland. The mahogany and brass showed that it was used to glamorous duties – taking admirals to inspect the fleet off Malta and Hong Kong. Arthur's father is a lay-preacher and it showed in his turn of phrase. 'I'll show you heaven. God is in this boat. He is in this lake, in this morning. He doesn't cause all this trouble. Man brings it on himself. It's the animal in him. We'll be destroyed in the end by star wars, or nuclear war, but God will make sure that there are two birds left and it will all start over again.'

The lake was exquisite. Erne is huge, fifty miles long, dotted with rush-surrounded islands. We went to Devenish Island to look at a twelfth-century round tower. In four hours we saw but one pleasure cruiser, which leaves Enniskillen each morning, and six cruisers with Germans behind the wheel. Arthur's father was born in the south but his mother told him to go north to be among his own people. He loves the north and all things English. 'It's all to do with the standards. You can see the difference once you get over the border; the farms look haphazard, the shops don't bother to open until 10.30. Here we work hard and everything is neat.'

'Is that why you are so against union?'

'It is. We don't want to be dragged down. It's got little to do with

religion. Look, they are so similar; we even share the same Creed.' He used to be a B Special, a member of what amounted to the armed branch of the Orange Order disbanded by the British government. 'You may think the present troubles started in the late sixties, but here on the border we have always had problems with the IRA. For fifty years we have had problems in this area. We're finely balanced in numbers, you know, Protestants and Roman Catholics.' I asked him if he felt that the Protestants had done anything to bring the present situation upon themselves. 'No,' he answered without hesitation.

'When you had your business did you employ Catholics?'

'I never asked. It's no matter to me what a man is.'

I was the only guest that night and agreed to have a simple meal at 7 o'clock so that Helen could go and see *West Side Story*. I would have gone too, but there were no tickets, so I glanced at a review in the local paper instead. It ended with the words: 'This is the type of show the idealism of which could teach Northern Ireland or any trouble-spot a lesson. Even though there is death there were plenty of opportunities for either side to back down. In the end they only agree to fight which led to the inevitable tragedy.'

Enniskillen has a huge leisure centre and an over-sized telephone exchange. Both have been funded in part by the EEC's development programme for poor areas. Fermanagh has done well out of membership. It has had millions towards farming, for draining the land and improving the soil. It now would like millions towards the expansion of tourism; for a craft centre for pottery, lace-making, leather and glass wear, for Romany caravans around the lake, for pony trekking and an equestrian park. Local government in this area is headed by a Catholic, a go-ahead, ambitious man who knows his way around the grant system. And, as I sat in the bus station waiting for the bus to Belfast, I hoped he might spend a few pounds on the arrival and departure point. The waiting room was so scruffy, so furnitureless and so smoke filled, I chose to wait outside, battered by the wind and the rain. I shared my bench with an eighteen-year-old who had just completed his A-levels and had spent a summer on a farm in Gloucestershire, where they had worn him out with work and given him not one day off. He condemned the motorway cafés and the bus stations in England. He said he couldn't imagine what foreigners made of them. He was so happy to be home.

In Belfast they were about to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Peace People. Everyone, at one time, knew the Peace People, a movement which erupted like a volcano one day in August 1976 when three young children died and their mother was wounded. British troops had fired on a car, killing the driver, IRA volunteer Danny

Lennon. The car swerved on to the pavement wounding Mrs Anne Maguire and killing her three children. Betty Williams was driving along behind; she knew the Maguire family; she saw the whole thing and together with the children's aunt, Mairaed Corrigan, appealed through the women of Northern Ireland for peace; for an end to the IRA campaign. She told the gunmen to get out. At their first rally 10,000 women turned up. The media, ever eager to find new ways of covering a story which had smouldered for eight years, found Williams and Corrigan irresistible. Two Catholic women telling the gunmen to get out. They became heroines; they travelled the world. On television in America Betty Williams begged the viewers to stop sending money for bombs and bullets; in Norway she danced with the crown prince. In 1977 the two women shared the Nobel Peace Prize. But it was all too much: the movement seemed to shatter in a wealth of gossip and bitchiness. What then were they celebrating in 1986? I was intrigued to find out.

I was intrigued because I had met Betty Williams. A publisher in 1981 thought it was time for her to tell the story of the rise and fall of the Peace People, and the story of Betty Williams. She had refused to cooperate with any of the writers who covered Northern Ireland but had consented to fly down to London to meet me. It was a weird occasion. She arrived at my house one afternoon dressed in cream from head to toe and covered in jewellery, and talked for hours at great speed, with great passion. She talked of the place where she was born to a Protestant father, a butcher, and a Catholic mother, a waitress; of a childhood filled with happiness; of marriage to an English merchant-seaman which had meant that she lived for a while in Bermuda before homesickness brought her back to Belfast in the mid-sixties. After that the happiness turned to horror. She talked of young children getting their heads blown off, caught in the cross-fire between the army and the IRA; of this dreary place called Belfast, where people went shopping with great reluctance because it took hours, through searches and blockades, to do a simple task; of a place controlled by racketeers who made a mint demanding protection money. What was I to make of this? I asked her what on earth she did when it all got too much for her. It was twilight, but I had not wanted to disturb her thoughts by putting on the lights. She turned to me: 'I go and have a damn good fuck.' I could not see her face at all clearly, and did not know how I was meant to take the remark. I laughed. We both laughed. And as I got up to put the lights on she said: 'Well, when shall we start on the book?'

We made plans to spend a month together in Northern Ireland, but out of Belfast. She left telling me she intended to find a cottage for us to rent. I never saw her again. Letters from the publishing company

went unanswered. It was 1981 and the hunger-strike, in which ten Republican prisoners died, was beginning. This attracted the world's attention in much the same way as had the Peace People. When Bobby Sands died, having just been elected to Westminster, reports state that 400 reporters and 300 photographers from around the globe turned up to cover his funeral. Betty Williams had warned me that the hunger-strike would take up all of her time. It did. And then somewhere in all that her personal life splintered and then was pieced together in a very Betty Williams way. She won a trip to America in a raffle and on her first day in Disneyland met an American engineer whom she subsequently married. She settled in Florida.

Mairaed Corrigan was the quiet one. When things got too much for her she went to church and prayed. At the Peace Weekend I met her. The peace movement had not died, she said, it had merely moved away from the television cameras, out of the limelight, to try slowly and quietly to change people's attitudes. The circus has gone but the work goes on.

'We work now on a one-to-one basis; we have a farm in Coleraine where Catholics and Protestants work together; we attempt to educate children together; we run Lifeline to support people who have lost relatives in the struggle. We have made progress - none of this could have happened ten years ago. It's a lifetime's work.' She spoke softly, her eyes looking directly into mine.

'Our common humanity should bind us. One day it will. We have made gods out of both unionist and nationalist. I reject both. I'll bow to no flag; flags have destroyed too many lives. Change will come through children being educated together. It's hard not to grow up a bigot in Northern Ireland, when you live in sections which care about nothing else except looking after their own. And yet our concerns are common; there's 27 per cent unemployment; a people living in poverty and yet thousands are being spent on security. Social issues have become secondary. We as a small movement cannot tackle social issues, but we challenge others to do so. Rallies don't solve anything, so I'm not sorry all that is over. Those who have remained in the movement are happy to work quietly at practical peacemaking. We are not depressed and we have not given up hope. We'll just carry on. I expect I will be here answering the same questions when I am ninety.'

The Peace People see themselves as part of a world movement of men and women trying to live in a more intelligent way. That's what they say. And certainly there was an international flavour to the weekend. Peace House was a jumble of accents, American, French, German, Dutch and Norwegian. Mid-morning we were invited to form small groups to discuss 'peacemaking'. The group I joined

contained a French priest who had met Mairead Corrigan in Paris ten years before and who said very little; an American called Sally who came from Seattle: 'A place a little larger than Belfast where they make aeroplanes and war machines'; another American called Jim who had come to Belfast in 1984 to see what all the fuss was about and was now back, during law school vacation, helping various projects; and Klaus, a German who said he was a Marxist and talked of workers' unity. What became apparent very quickly was that there was a gulf between the so-called intellectual peacemakers and folk like Kathy who said: 'I'm no good at talking. I sell the *Peace* newspaper door to door and talk to people and I help paint over any graffiti that we think are offensive.' And Betty, who talked of how difficult it was for some Catholic women to become members and of how she got snubbed and spat at and how her windows were broken. And then there was Isobel Bennett: 'I have no difficulty in talking and you'll just have to shut me up. I'm involved in so many projects I don't know where to begin.'

Isobel Bennett's family came to Belfast from Aberdeen in 1920. Her father sought work in the shipyard and couldn't understand why he had to state his religion on the application form. Isobel was born in 1926 and can remember a childhood of poverty with her mother having to buy rotting vegetables. Isobel caught polio and spent many of her young years in bed rather than in school. 'So, God love you, I'm not educated. I'm really not intellectual enough for the Peace People. I often feel my ideas are not good enough. The trouble is that a lot of people come to paddle and are made to swim.'

For all that, Mrs Bennett gives the impression of being a strong swimmer and, as she had said, once she started talking about her projects, such was her enthusiasm she found it hard to stop. Her latest project was concerned with battered wives and she has had a long involvement with Lifeline. She introduced me to a family whose son had been shot by the IRA. The son, who worked in a petrol station, had been a member of the UDR (the Ulster Defence Regiment - a regiment of the British Army recruited in Northern Ireland). He'd only been a member for a couple of months and the family are convinced that the shooting was a case of mistaken identity. The killing does not make sense to them otherwise. Their graphic description of the event and the effect it had on their lives I found harrowing. 'We brought him home to his own bedroom and among the people who came to pay their respects, there were as many Catholics as there were Protestants.' They shielded their other children from the details of the murder only to have their daughter ask them one night exactly what happened. The family sat up until 4.30 in the morning going

through it all in the hope that they could help her come to terms with the anguish. They found Lifeline an invaluable support, particularly the holidays that were arranged for similar victims, both Catholic and Protestant. It helped to be among people who understand; who understand that there were times to laugh and times to cry.

They showed me photographs of such a holiday and as they led me through the pictures they said: 'This woman's husband died of a heart attack when he heard that their son had committed suicide because he could no longer cope with being a policeman.' 'This little girl's granddaddy died when they came over the border one night and fired into a church. When she was on holiday she had nightmares all the while.' 'We found these two sitting together one day. One said, "Protestants killed my Daddy", and the other said, "Catholics killed my Daddy."' By the time we got through the album I was swallowing hard to choke back the tears. For a fleeting second I wished the television cameras were there so millions could see the album, the photographs of these families, of these children, and share my emotion. In the next fleeting second I scorned the thought. What good would that do? The screen would act as a barrier; the viewer would be unlikely to be as affected as I was and if somehow, something got through to some of them, and they too found themselves choking back the tears . . . what then? Unlike pictures of starving children in Africa, you couldn't just reach for your chequebook and feel better. You couldn't organize a pop concert or issue a record or take part in a fun run. It was a great wave of emotion that started the Peace People in the first place and here we were ten years later sitting around contemplating whether or not to attend a strawberry tea to celebrate that ten years had passed!

A member who farmed in Ballymena was putting on the tea and I had decided not to go, but somehow I got swept along as everyone else was piling into cars. I jumped into the back seat of a car driven by an elderly woman who needed to concentrate on the road rather than talk; her husband wasn't the talking kind. Sharing the back seat with me was Kevin Lynch, a student at Queen's who was helping to provide the entertainment during the tea - a sketch about South Africa. Kevin was portraying the UK government's point of view on economic sanctions: 'They'd only hurt those we wanted to help'; another Peace Person portrayed the Afrikaner: 'We made this land profitable; we made this country rich.' A girl portrayed the blacks by reworking the words of Psalm 23: 'He maketh me to lie down in poverty and oppression,' and so on. The crude parallels were there for those who wanted to pick them up. The sketch was followed by peace songs.

Kevin and I got a lift back to Belfast much earlier than we expected

and as we arrived he offered to walk with me through the Falls Road. 'You musn't wander around there on your own. You'd be better off in the company of a local Catholic, even though I don't live in the area.' We'd formed a bond earlier in the afternoon when he asked me where I was born. I'd answered west London and he'd fired back, 'Hayes?' 'That's exactly the spot. How did you guess?' 'It's the only place I know. Lots of Catholics from Belfast used to go there to work in the factories.' He'd promised me an hour of his time; one way and another it turned out to be a lot longer than that.

We walked the entire length of the Falls Road, beginning at the Divis Flats, concrete filing-cabinets, some empty, some inhabited. On the ground between them were broken bottles, litter, general mess. Young children played on bicycles and young girls tottered around in spiky-heeled shoes and tight trousers. 'Some of these flats are so damp that they cause health problems as bad as anything you'd find in the Third World.' He'd never been to the Third World but it seemed pointless to tell him that there was nothing in Northern Ireland to compare with the poverty and the problems of the Third World.

Around the corner from the Divis Flats there were new houses, neat town houses, arranged around a courtyard, each with its own front patio. There was no mess, no litter. This estate had won prizes; this is the council housing of the future.

'They're all right aren't they? We're doing quite well despite Mrs Thatcher's cuts in public expenditure. I don't suppose she dares cut back on money to Northern Ireland.'

They did look all right. They didn't look any different from a modern private development. The top end of the Falls Road where it joins Springfield Road did not look any different from thousands of pre-war housing developments. Dreary, boxy, sound. Off the main street, where side roads met at right angles, I could see the peace lines; slatted wood screens rising fifteen feet into the air. It was just possible to see through to the other side by peering through the slats. A scruffy child of four or five was throwing stones at the wall. The pubs were covered in barbed wire. I suggested we stop for a drink, but Kevin said no.

'These are community pubs and they would be very suspicious; they'd stop talking the minute we walked in and we'd both feel very uncomfortable.' I argued that I'd still like to go inside for ten minutes, but he was adamant. Grey police armoured vehicles passed us; green army armoured cars passed us at regular intervals. Kevin had long given up noticing them.

We walked slowly for nearly two hours with Kevin giving me his views on the Peace People and the various conflicting personalities. He

had, he said, almost come to the end of his time with the movement. He joined when young because the social life had been good and he'd done his bit helping here and there, but he didn't think that he had much more to offer. 'I'm so materialistic compared to some of them and it bothers me at times. If I couldn't get a job I wanted I'd prefer to join the police rather than be jobless, and that's not going to go down very well is it? I'm even prepared to work for Short's making missiles . . . think what they'd make of that!'

I liked his honesty.

'Do you find the atmosphere tense?' he asked me.

'No, I find it rather relaxed,' which it was, walking along on a summer evening talking as the light faded.

'The other evening I was heading home and a car came around the corner fast, its wheels squealing and I thought, this is it! I could be killed! Any car coming around the corner fast makes me think like that, particularly after dark. We must be out of here by the time light goes.'

We paused for a while to sit on a bench in a square of green which passed for a park and watched children scooting around on BMX bicycles. Then we headed back the way we had come. The streets were deserted, so that anyone walking along caught one's attention and held it. I spotted a pretty girl dressed for a Saturday night and remarked upon her looks to Kevin.

'Yes, she is pretty. Have you read Orwell? He talks about proletarian beauty; beauty that fades very quickly. That girl will be ugly in a few years time. They are all the same; at seventeen they say they'll never get married and be like their mums, and then by nineteen they are married and a few years later they'll be left looking after a couple of kids while their husbands are in the pubs.'

We watched the pretty girl disappear into a bar selling milkshakes and burgers. Since Kevin wouldn't allow me into a pub, I suggested a milkshake. When I came to pay I found my purse missing. For a moment I thought I had had my pocket picked, because I had stopped outside to quip with a couple of boys who wanted to know if I was American. I'd said yes because it was clearly what they wanted to hear, and this particular Irish habit is contagious. It was an unworthy thought and I knew that the only place it could have slipped from my pocket was when we had sat for a while on the park bench. That was forty-five minutes past, and I felt sure it would no longer be there. None the less I felt compelled to go back and check. This we did, hiring a taxi from a video-hire shop.

'I bet this lot is unauthorized and uninsured,' commented Kevin, but I couldn't have cared less so long as we got back to the bench. We both jumped from the car, leaving the driver looking a touch surprised,

and ran to the spot. I shut my eyes and then slowly opened them. The purse was there, black and bulky, sitting on the park bench. I hugged Kevin with relief. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's go home and I'll introduce you to my parents.' We told the taxi driver the story when we got back into the car. He said: 'No need to be amazed at the honesty. The kids probably thought there was a bomb in it - that's why they didn't touch it.' I felt as though he had stuck a pin in the balloon of my spirits.

Kevin's mother and father live in a small house behind Queen's University, in a street in which front doors open straight on to the pavement. His parents, sitting either side of a large fire, were watching a John Wayne movie on the television. They seemed delighted to see us, just as Kevin said they would be.

'OK if Linda stays to tea, Mum?'

'Of course it is. I'll have it ready in a minute,' and she walked into the narrow kitchen leading from the sitting room. There was no door, so she could stay in touch with the conversation. Before long we had in front of us huge mugs of tea and cold meat and salad and a jolly conversation about . . . Northern Ireland. Kevin's dad, who drives a digger for a construction company, enjoys talking politics, just as Kevin had said he would.

'It's your man with the pipe that's to blame. He didn't stand firm. If he'd stood firm against that strike, all this would be over. Sinn Fein would have no need to grow and it would all be over.'

There are many who would agree. Ireland had gone well for Edward Heath's government in 1973. With William Whitelaw as Secretary of State many steps had been taken towards the setting up of a power-sharing executive. The main parties at least seemed to agree on the main points (Unionist representing Protestants; the SDLP representing Labour and the cross-communal alliance and Northern Ireland Labour Parties). Then a conference was called at Sunningdale to discuss the setting up of a Council of Ireland and the carefully built-up cards began to tumble. They always do at this point: power-sharing between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland is a big enough step; trying to include the Republic as well is like watching a baby learning to walk . . . a few steps forward, much cooing and then bump.

And Kevin's father was right about Harold Wilson, but 1974 was a messy year in British politics. The Heath government lost the election in February 1974 by a handful of votes, which meant the new government stumbled around until another election was called in October 1974. Ireland once more slipped through British fingers.

'You've only got your man with a pipe to blame. Now, I don't see much change for the next thirty years. What do you think?'

'I came here thinking it was all nice and simple: a united Ireland had to be the right answer and if that was a hard pill for the Protestants then they had only themselves to blame for misruling the province for so many years. If they had given the Catholics a fair go from the beginning none of this would have happened.'

I paused and he waited.

'Now I see it as infinitely more complicated. I appreciate how the Protestants feel about their place in the north and how they feel towards the south which has made very little effort to become an attractive marriage partner. I'd still love to see a happily united Ireland with both Protestants and Catholics showing toleration and understanding towards each other.'

I told them of my meeting with Tony Crowe and how he'd made me realize the isolation the Protestants now felt; how the south didn't want them and how they no longer felt 'loyal' to the union with Great Britain. And how perhaps the only answer, long term, was a measure of independence for Northern Ireland - not devolution and Stormont as before, but independence within the EEC, which would offer much-needed money provided the Protestants did not go back to their bad old ways. An independent Northern Ireland with good links to southern Ireland, that would be an alternative to a united Ireland, but how to get that position! At that point we all began to toss in thoughts and half thoughts, all of which have been aired endlessly over the years. If only the British government (Labour) had not sent in the troops; if only, once they had committed themselves to such a policy they had backed it with toughness instead of insisting on a softly-softly approach; if only the border were more secure - it would help curb the IRA; if only the protection rackets could be stamped out - it would starve the IRA of funds; if only there could be an end to segregated schooling - it would enable children to grow up less bigoted; if only there were more jobs for both Protestants and Catholics, but in particular for Catholics. If only this and if only that. For the moment, the only *practical* path is to press for greater tolerance and understanding between Catholics and Protestants. We must keep trying to find a way to silence the extremists and let the moderates hold sway.

'All we want is to be left to live our lives,' said Kevin's father. 'It's not too bad around here; we feel safe enough. We say to ourselves we might get killed, but if we do it will be worse for the chap that is left.'

It was 10 p.m. Kevin's father raked the fire. Kevin walked me to the bus stop anxious to be away to his party.

*

The ferry for Stranraer left at 8 a.m. I stood on the deck watching the coastline disappear and marvelling at the patterns made by chimneys belching smoke into the sky. I felt loath to leave. I'd arrived with an empty diary and I was leaving with a wealth of memories, not the sort you have to dredge from the depths of your mind, but the sort that float lightly beneath the surface and return instantly at odd and surprising moments. I would no longer close my ears and eyes to reports of violence in newspapers and on television. I might feel irritated by the squabbling, but the irritation would be eased by a small nugget of understanding and a vast feeling of warmth towards the place and the people. And I might think twice before muttering that religion makes fools of men. It can and it does. But there's Strongbow at the back of it all; one nation trying to swallow another nation is inclined to make men mad. But a murderous little war is no answer; 2,500 people have died since 1968.

'Hallo, we met at the Peace Weekend. I'm a friend of Kevin's. I know all about your purse!'

He was an art student who one day hoped to teach. He'd been in the Peace Movement since he was thirteen and stayed, he said, because he thought about things more than most people of his age and had found no alternative outlet for his energy and his desire to do something to help. On that morning, at that early hour, he was downcast. He needed to get away for a while and was heading for Portsmouth where his brother now lived and owned a shop. He had no intention of leaving for good; he just knew he had to get away for a bit. The Anglo-Irish Agreement had escalated the Troubles and this had prompted the downcast mood.

He had a friend who worked on a building site; the company often did work for the security forces. 'We have always known that the IRA pick off people who work with the security forces, but now it is stated policy and people have become frightened. My friend went to the boss and said he thought he'd better leave and was told that the company were paying "protection money" and therefore would be left alone. Paying protection money does not mean that you are going to be safe, but not paying it certainly means you are not going to be safe.'

We talked of art. He told me stories of five-year-olds drawing flowers and then colouring them green, white and orange. I assume he was a Catholic. They say you can tell by simply looking at someone. But that seems absurd to me and anyway I never learnt the trick. And I certainly was not going to ask. Only once during my visit did I feel the need to ask a man whether he was a Catholic or Protestant. I had to struggle with the words and felt deeply embarrassed.

Chapter 7

Newcastle's Backstreet Butterflies

I broke my train journey from Stranraer at Penrith. I had planned a visit to the Lake District before going to Northern Ireland, feeling certain that I would need a quiet couple of days to rearrange my thoughts. But in the end I didn't flee from Belfast, I left with reluctance and somehow the contrast with the north of England's - or even England's - most picturesque patch was unsettling. I suppose you could call it culture shock. I found that the aloof tranquillity of the hills and mountains and vales and the aching placidity of the still lakes and woods made my thoughts turn time and again to the warmth, vitality and immediacy of those I'd met in Northern Ireland. The permanency of nature; its perfect seasonal rhythms grated against the transiency of human life, the friction of ideas and the rough and tumble of untidy lives.

I am not immune to the wonders of nature, but I am moved more when they take me by surprise. Driving to Kinlochbervie I was surprised; boating on Loch Erne I was surprised. But how could I be surprised in the Lake District, when writers have been evoking the area, often in stylized exaggeration, for more than 200 years? For a couple of days I became a tourist; the kind of tourist that potters around villages, has lunch on the lawns of pubs, and spends hours on boats chugging up and down Ullswater and Windermere. It was a visual feast and, sated with scenic beauty, I resumed my train journey to Newcastle; travelling from a place renowned for its loveliness to a place renowned as a 'waste land'.

The metro yielded my first impression of Newcastle; it's an impressive, extensive and integrated transport system that whizzes Geordies across their city with clean, swift precision. The stations are light and brightly painted and they have clever machines which, once you've told them where you want to go, tell you the cost of your