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Boy's killing a disturbing tale

Pro fide et patria

Editorial

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THE case of Henry Cunningham is a sadly familiar story of the Troubles. A boy shot dead, a family plunged into a nightmare of grief, no-one brought to justice. Henry was just 16 when he was murdered by the UVF in August 1973.

Gunmen fired on the southern-registration van he was travelling in, believing they were targeting Catholic

workmen. In fact, the Cunninghams are a Presbyterian family from Carndonagh, Co Donegal, and were driving home along the M2 after a day's work in Glengormley.

Henry, who was shot in the leg and the heart, was the 857th victim of the Troubles.

His death was the cruellest blow imaginable to his family but, as far as the authorities on both sides of the border were concerned, the teenager's murder counted for very little.

To say he was low on their list of priorities would give the impression that he was given any priority at all.

In fact, the murder of Henry Cunningham was simply ignored, dismissed, forgotten. An inquest was held just three weeks after his death – an unusually swift time frame which allowed little opportunity for a full investigation.

More than 30 years passed, during which time relatives received no information from police, the Irish government or the British government. Indeed, it was 2006 before the Historical Enquiries Team officially told the Cunninghams that the UVF – and not the IRA as the family had long believed – had killed their brother.

As a result of the HET investigation it has now emerged that a Sterling sub-machine gun used in the attack which killed Henry Cunningham had been stolen from a UDR base in Lurgan in October 1972. This weapon was also used in the murder of two Catholic workmen in 1974, as well as an attempted murder in 1973.

According to the HET report, military intelligence files revealed strong evidence of collusion in the arms raid.

That security forces colluded with loyalist paramilitaries throughout the Troubles is not in doubt. Nevertheless, the details uncovered by the HET in this case make disturbing reading.

Investigators found that the weapons used were recovered by the RUC but destroyed, despite their link to unsolved crimes, while ballistic testing guidelines were not observed.

The sad death of Henry Cunningham is a litany of failure – from those who colluded with sectarian killers to those who sidelined the family's right to information and justice.

Finally relatives are learning some of the details about their brother's death.

It is a step in the right direction but the length of this process has highlighted, once again, the difficulties faced by victims in their search for answers.

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