Island Pamphlets: the background story

Michael Hall

ISLAND 140 PAMPHLETS

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Further biographical information can be found
in the following Island Pamphlets:

Pamphlet no. 4	*Idle Hours* (pages 2–4 and 23–25)
Pamphlet no. 59	*Home and Away* (first section, pages 4–16)
Pamphlet no. 117	*History of Belfast Anarchist & Libertarian Groups*
Pamphlet no. 137	*Grassroots Experiences*
Pamphlet no. 138	*The role of the Media + Selected Articles*
Pamphlet no. 139	*Assorted Anecdotes*

My book *Island Pamphlets (Selection 2)* also contains biographical information as well as the pamphlet series listed both chronologically and thematically

Island Pamphlets: the background story

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The following is an edited account of an interview conducted by

Dr **Fearghus Roulston**

(Oral Historian at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow)

1: Early Days

I am the eldest of five children. I was born in 1949 in what was termed 'Protestant working-class East Belfast'. However, I never really knew what the word 'Protestant' meant because my upbringing had been completely secular. One of my uncles succinctly expressed our family's attitude towards religion when he said: "The word 'God' is spelt wrong. There should have been *two* 'o's in it. Always striving to behave with 'good' intentions towards others is the only religion you really need." Many of my family were socialists or trade unionists. My maternal uncle and grandfather were both platers in Harland & Wolff shipyard. Now, I never met my grandfather, as he died a couple of months before I was born, but he was a 'shipyard poet' as well, and he also wrote numerous short stories for the '*Ulster'*. His poetry focused on working-class life, particularly his shipyard experiences, and at family gatherings we would often read his poetry aloud. My uncle would also have us singing barbershop harmonies.

But... I'll briefly jump forward here to 1976 when I decided to bring out a collection of my grandfather's poetry. Initially, I tried a number of publishers, without success, and then a friend, Terri Hooley, said: "Mike, just do it yourself." So Terri and I brought out a small booklet of the poetry and Dave Hyndman, a community printer attached to *Just Books*, printed it and my brothers did some of the artwork. We stood outside Harland & Wolff, Mackies, and other workplaces selling the booklet, and it proved extremely popular. And even after it was sold out we still kept getting requests from people who wanted to send copies to relatives in Canada, the United States, Australia or wherever. And then… I'm conscious I'm jumping forward in time yet again!… when, years later, I initiated my 'Island

Pamphlets' series I decided to seek funding to produce a more professional edition. I applied to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for support but the Combined Arts Director wrote back to say that the collection "remains verse rather than poetry [and is not] of sufficient aesthetic worth to warrant subvention." Now, plenty of people really liked the poems and, in fact, one individual used them when he was giving elocution lessons. Hence, when I later published the collection at my own expense [Island Pamphlet No. 4, *Idle Hours*], in the foreword I criticised the Arts Council, reminding them that their funding was *public* money after all, and asking why it was not available to support 'popular' tastes rather than simply subsidising the efforts of the intellectual elite.

But to get back now to my childhood days. As I said, I didn't know what Protestantism was, I didn't even know much about religion until I attended primary school. We had moved from East Belfast across town to the Botanic area and I was sent to a primary school there. Now, I'm not sure what year I was in but one day the teacher said: "Right class, I want you all to bring your Bibles in tomorrow." And then she said: "Michael, you're looking a bit confused, you *do* have a Bible?" "I'm not sure, miss." "But what do you use in church?" And when I told her we didn't go to church she was livid and ordered me to go into the corner and stand facing the wall for the remainder of the class! I was there almost half an hour, and when I got home and told my parents my mother immediately got on her coat. My father stopped her and said: "Where are you going?" She said: "I'm going to tell that teacher what I think of her!" "No, no," said my father, "Michael will only get the brunt of this." So he had to go out and purchase our first and only family Bible.

Anyway, that was my first awareness that there was a religious element to life here, let alone a religious *divide*. However, awareness of that divide arose later because my parents were always keen to celebrate the Irish component of our 'Northern Irish' heritage, and as part of that one of my sisters and I were sent to Patricia Mulholland's School of Irish Dancing. And we were in the dance class on one occasion when some of the other children approached us and one of them asked, *not* with any animosity I must stress, just curiosity: "Michael, are you two Protestants or Catholics?" I said, "I don't know", and they said, "Oh, you must be Protestants then because a Catholic would know."

In fact, my first experience of sectarianism was actually Catholic sectarianism, and it manifested itself through our involvement in Irish dancing – clear evidence that sectarian attitudes existed on *all* sides within Northern Irish society.

2: Growing political awareness

Anyway, I will 'fast forward' now to a later period in my life. 1968 was a very important year for my political development – the Vietnam War, the 'May events' in Paris, the shooting of Rudi Dutschke in Germany, the invasion of Czechoslovakia…. Prior to 1968 I had initially held a positive view about Lenin and the Russian Revolution. However, I was always keen to explore history in depth, and so I began to read extensively, searching out anything that would enlighten me as to what the *Russian people* had been doing, as opposed to just Lenin and his Bolsheviks. And I eventually came to realise that the Bolshevik 'revolution' was, in reality, a Bolshevik *coup d'état* and that the *real* revolution had been made by the ordinary people, it wasn't made by the Bolsheviks. Indeed, that grassroots-led revolution was manipulated and ultimately destroyed by the Bolsheviks.

And so I rejected Leninism and all forms of authoritarian communism and found I had more affinity with 'libertarian socialism'. In the late sixties I also read pamphlets by the English-based Solidarity group: titles such as *Paris May '68*, *Hungary '56*, *The Kronstadt Commune, The Workers' Opposition*… and these were not only important to my political development but, as I will explain later, had a direct bearing on my eventual decision to initiate my Island Pamphlets series.

3: People's Democracy and the Burntollet ambush

After the police in Derry had used their batons on Civil Rights marchers on 5 October 1968, students from Queen's University, and some non-students like myself – although the following year I did go to Queen's to do a Social Science degree – came out three days later to protest. When our march into central Belfast was halted due to a gathering of Ian Paisley's supporters, after a mass sit-down we all went back to Queen's where the radical People's Democracy [PD] grouping was formed.

I witnessed the Burntollet ambush on 4 January 1969. I myself was assaulted during a secondary attack by loyalists waiting in Irish Street on the outskirts of Derry. Not only was this all a physical shock but, perhaps more importantly, it was also a cultural shock. I realised that I had been brought up totally remote from the sectarianism and the tribalism within my own society, and that there was so much that had lain hidden from me.

My father condemned the PD's 4-day march to Derry, especially the way it had served to inflame inter-communal tensions. And while he fully accepted that those who had harassed and assaulted the marchers had been motivated by pure sectarianism, he also believed that the PD were so much in thrall to *international* events – and, in particular, our efforts to emulate the worldwide student protests and

demonstrations – that we had completely misread our own *local* situation, and misjudged – or worse, ignored – the dangers of violent sectarian conflict.

Concerned that loyalists could come looking for me – by that time we had moved to the bottom of the Lisburn Road, very close to the staunchly loyalist Sandy Row – my father 'advised' me to leave home. And so I began the search for a flat. I eventually got one in Fitzroy Avenue in the university area and soon found myself attracted to one of the girls in the flat upstairs, and that was Sheila: and she was to become my soulmate during 50 years of marriage.

4: Belfast Libertarian Group

In 1973, in the hope of engendering a grassroots debate which might challenge the escalating violence, four of us formed the Belfast Libertarian Group and produced a short pamphlet *Ireland, Dead or Alive?* In the pamphlet – which we hoped would be the first in a series – I not only attacked Unionism and its divisive legacy, but I also condemned the Provisional IRA's campaign of violence. We passed it round a few community groups, but remained unsure as to whether it would generate much reaction or feedback. However, within a couple of weeks a friend of mine said he needed to see me urgently. He had ongoing contact with the Provos – in fact, he was eventually to join Sinn Féin – and they had asked him if he knew who had written the pamphlet. And when he said he did, they gave him the following message: "Tell your mate that if he writes anything like that again he'll get his knees ventilated!"

About that same time, loyalists had also stopped me in the street and warned: "We're gonna get you, you bastard – just wait and see!"

But perhaps most disillusioning of all was the response from the PD. Members of the PD would meet in Kelly's Cellars every Saturday morning. I was there one Saturday when some of the more prominent PD leaders were also present. I started complaining about the threats we had received from the Provos, and one of those present said to me: "It's your own bloody fault." I said: "What do you mean?" And he replied: "Sure the Provos and the loyalists have got it all sewn up between them. There's nothing we can do." I said: "But what about all our fiery rhetoric about 'working-class unity'?" And another responded: "Working-class unity? There's no chance of that now." I retorted: "So, we are just going to abandon that idea then?" "There's nothing we can do; you've got to face reality."

So, on top of the threats I had received, coupled with my disillusionment with the PD – and considering also that my wife-to-be was from a Catholic background – I thought to myself: we'd be best to get offside for a while. So immediately after our marriage we headed off to Amsterdam to look for work.

5: A Year in Amsterdam

When we arrived in Amsterdam we initially slept rough in the Vondelpark. This was the last year that hippies and backpackers were allowed to sleep in the park. One of the city's main roads went over a section of the park and in the underpass which this created members of the city's youth committee had set up secure storage for backpacks. So before you went to sleep in your plastic bag in the park – it was forbidden to erect tents – you logged your backpack into this facility and picked it up again in the morning. Apart from a temporary stay in one of the cheap 'sleep-ins', also organised by the youth committee, we had moved back to the park by the time – after some weeks of weary searching – we secured our first jobs.

I ended up with three different jobs: bottling pickles, working in a brickworks, then packing consignments in Honeywell's distribution centre near Schiphol airport. Sheila got a more permanent job in a local bank. When a girl in Sheila's section of the bank learned that we were sleeping in the park she commented: "Oh, so you have nowhere to stay? That's perfect." "What do you mean?" Sheila asked. "I'm going off on holiday soon and I urgently need to find someone to look after my apartment, so you can have it." We thought this was really generous of her, but there was a slight catch: the girl explained that there were a 'few things' we could do for her in return. The apartment was coming down with dozens of plants which all had to be watered using a spray bottle, which took ages to do. There were also tortoises and cats, and these had to be fed and looked after. What Sheila didn't know at the time was that she was allergic to cats; it was only afterwards that we realised the origin of her itchy eyes and constant sneezing.

About a month into our stay in Amsterdam one of Sheila's work colleagues said to her: "Your face has changed since you came here. When you first arrived it looked strained and stressed but now you look much more relaxed." And it was only then that we realised how deeply the Troubles had been affecting us. Our flat in Fitzroy Avenue had been situated between the mainly Catholic McClure Street area and the area known locally as the 'Holylands', which at that time was still a mainly Protestant working-class area (although the demographics have radically changed since then). There was a 'corner shop' half-way down Fitzroy Avenue – now long gone – and when you went to buy milk or bread in the evening you listened intently at any passing cars, and if a car's engine slowed down at all your senses were heightened, and you breathed a long sigh of relief when it had gone past. This was because of all the 'drive-by' murders and assassinations. The worst year of all for killings was 1972 with 467 victims, and the next few years weren't much better. We lived in Amsterdam from June '74 to June '75.

One of Amsterdam's most popular pedestrianised shopping streets is the Kalverstraat, and sometimes we'd stroll down it in the evening or early morning (by that time we were renting a houseboat moored close to the city centre). And when some of our Dutch friends or Sheila's work colleagues found out that we were walking down the Kalverstraat at two in the morning they were horrified. For to them, certainly at that time of day, it was the haunt of petty criminals and drug addicts. But to us it wasn't Belfast – and that was enough.

And then we came back to Belfast with the intention of backpacking across Asia, using the money we had saved in Amsterdam. Now, we had to linger for another year because Sheila had a blood disorder which required her to get her spleen removed. But finally, in June 1976, we headed off on our 'big trip' across Asia.

6: Backpacking across Asia

Our 19 months of travelling provided us with a host of unforgettable memories: being detained by the Turkish army on suspicion of spying for Greece, bumping across the desert-like landscape of northern Afghanistan in open-topped local transport, feeling not only sick but anxious as rickety old buses crawled their way around precarious hairpin bends in Pakistan's beautiful Swat valley, trekking to the Annapurna Sanctuary in Nepal, smuggling spices from Sri Lanka into India, sleeping on the deck of an old riverboat plying the Irrawaddy River in Burma, working to replenish our finances in Australia, hitchhiking around Japan in the snow, travelling the length of the Trans-Siberian Railway in the middle of the Russian winter… and many other such experiences. And the warmth and generosity we encountered in every country only served to reinforce our already firmly-held belief that ordinary people's needs were the same the world over, as was their desire to see a better world for their children – irrespective of all the many and varied religious and cultural 'differences' which attempted to divide them.

[I was able to write a book about it afterwards because I had kept a diary. Now, it started out as a 'photograph diary', but it soon bulged with incidents, characters we met, train timetables, the state of our stomachs and everything else; and so, along with the 1000 colour slides I had taken, I was able to recall everything vividly. It was actually our daughter Helen who prompted me to write the book. Initially I tried several publishers without success, so in 2007 I decided to publish it myself. (*Remembering the Hippie Trail: travelling across Asia 1976–1978)*]

I'll relate one interesting experience: Having crossed the Khyber Pass from Afghanistan into Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, we travelled up the Swat Valley, where we were somewhat taken aback by the sight of so many gun-toting

men. One day we went for a walk along a beautiful river and many people were out gathering walnuts and fruit; everyone was extremely friendly and insisted on giving us share of what they had collected. And then we arrived at this small village where a fête was in progress, and some children came running over to us – children everywhere in Asia were fascinated by visitors. Anyway, the children took me over to shoot at a line of tethered balloons. I can't remember what type of rifle it was, but it certainly wasn't your usual fairground pop gun. I fired at the balloons and hit every one of them. A few local men, bandoleers across their chests and rifles cradled proudly in their arms, came over and nodded approvingly: "Good, good. They shoot good in your country?" And I thought to myself: how do you answer that?

7: Community outreach for the NSPCC

Our son Christopher was born in 1978 (our daughter Helen was to follow in 1980). In 1978 I went back to Queen's University to do a Master of Social Work degree, and then joined the NSPCC. When I was there I tried to develop a community-orientated approach to social work. I would approach different community groups and explain: "I'm the NSPCC social worker for your area, and I'd like to work closely with you. If you encounter problems which are child-related you can ask for my advice, or even, if need be, refer them to me. In return, NSPCC is inundated with a lot of benefit queries, housing queries and such, and if your advice workers could take some of these off my hands, that would be great." And that arrangement worked really well.

Then, in one particular community, a group of young women came to me and said that they would like to assist with some of my families. I told them that, for reasons of confidentiality, I couldn't divulge just who I was visiting, but I was sure that they themselves knew families with similar problems. But they then revealed that they were hesitant to approach such families in case they found something they couldn't handle. So I worked out a 'contract' with them to help overcome such fears. I said: "Look, I will give you informal talks on different aspects of social work, and also, if you go to visit a family and find there are things you can't cope with you can contact me for advice. And if the family would like me to visit, I will do so. However, if you come upon any evidence of child abuse I will *have* to intervene whether the family agree to this or not." Some time later I met the group of women again and asked how things were progressing. And they were managing perfectly fine. The very fact of knowing that there was professional assistance 'on call' allowed them the freedom to utilise their own natural empathetic abilities.

8: *Expecting the Future*

Around this time I wrote a play, *Expecting the Future,* about five women in a pre-natal ward waiting to bring children into the world. The play describes the emotions experienced by each of the women: one of them is a policeman's widow, whose husband had been recently murdered, while another is a woman left to bring up her children alone now that *her* partner, a member of the IRA, was facing a lengthy prison sentence. The play was used as a 'reading script' by a number of youth groups, and what was heartening was the ability of young people in both communities to readily identify with *all* of the play's characters. By concentrating *solely* on the grief experienced by the women, rather than let any local politics intrude, the play managed to touch that sense of compassion which was gratifyingly common to all the young performers. Young girls reading it in Springhill Community House, Ballymurphy, could identify with the grief expressed by the policeman's widow, just as teenagers from a nearby Shankill community project could relate to the anguish expressed by the IRA member's wife.

Patricia Downey put on a performance at the Lyric Theatre. It was the first play she had ever directed, and years later she told me that that experience was what motivated her to set up her 'Spanner in the Works Theatre Company', and she has produced scores of excellent plays since then, many of them tackling grassroots issues. [*Expecting the Future* is included in my compilation book *Island Pamphlets (Selection 2)*]

9: Engagement with the paramilitaries

So... up until then my community endeavours not only involved my social work outreach on behalf of the NSPCC, but I began to link up with community activists such as radical 'worker priest' Father Des Wilson. However, I'd deliberately kept away from any involvement with paramilitaries – loyalist or republican – because after the threats I'd received and the almost daily murders that were being perpetrated I just felt republicans and loyalists were plagues upon the backs of our communities, and as far as I was concerned I wanted nothing to do with any of them. And then I came across a slim book of poetry by Sam Duddy, *Concrete Whirlpools of the Mind*. Duddy was the public relations officer for the loyalist UDA [Ulster Defence Association] and while some of his poems were typically loyalist others took me by surprise. For example, here's a poem about two childhood friends, one a Catholic, the other a Protestant, who years later end up on opposite sides of a riot. And during the riot one of them gets killed and the poem goes:

> He felt helpless at the tears that were falling

As he stood there exposed in the rain
And he cursed the political figures
For their use of the dupes once again.
"Oh, Tony forgive me, it's crazy
Sure we're fighting for what? No-one knows
And they say it's because of religion
That made you and me deadly foes."

And then here's one about politicians:

They emerge from their ivory towers
And gaze down on the people below
And they think we should bend with the wind, boys
As they huff and they puff and they blow.
And they try to make newspaper headlines
With their speeches that nobody heeds
For we tire of the old repetition
It's the rock upon which hatred breeds.

When I read that small book of poems I thought: I'm forgetting my own rule of thumb here, which is that every organisation contains both the good and the bad. So I decided to make my way over to the East Belfast headquarters of the UDA. Now, although I had been born in East Belfast – and most of my family were originally from there – but after we had moved away from East Belfast, first to the Botanic area and then to the Lisburn Road, East Belfast by then had become 'foreign territory' to me. Indeed, I'd have been more familiar with the Falls and Springfield Roads and having nationalist friends.

Anyway, I walked into the UDA headquarters and was able to see Andy Tyrie, the organisation's Chairman. Tyrie proved to be a very approachable individual and he asked what he could do for me. I said: "I'll be up-front with you, Andy. I'm a social worker for the NCPCC and as far as I'm concerned *you people*, the republican movement and our assorted politicians are making a bloody mess of this country." He then said: "Well, you'd best sit down and we can have a talk," and hours later we were still talking.

One of the first things I had said to him was: "By the way, soon after I leave here I'm going over to Ballymurphy to see Father Des Wilson. (Fr. Wilson was always being verbally attacked by loyalists, and I wanted Tyrie to know exactly where I stood: that I was working in, and for, *both* communities.) And Tyrie replied: "Well, give him my regards. I used to live in Ballymurphy, near the 'Bullring' [the circular area around a group of shops] and while we have our differences the people there are good people."

During my discussions with Tyrie I realised that there was a diverse range of people within the loyalist community: the far-Right ones, the Labour-type people, the ones who hated Catholics, the ones who were accommodating… And Tyrie asked if I would help them write a play focusing on that reality and they would get it performed in loyalist pubs and clubs, in an effort to stimulate progressive debate. So Sammy Duddy, Tyrie and I sat down together to write it.

10: *This is It!*

Tyrie came up with the basic storyline, as well as the title, *This is it!*, about a young Protestant, embittered by what was happening to his beloved Northern Ireland, who is enthused when he hears Ian Paisley saying: 'This is it! Ulster must fight!' This young Protestant decides to follow Paisley to Newtownards for one of the latter's 'Third Force' mass gatherings. But in the end he is left disillusioned. So I went away and wrote it up, based on our three-way discussions.

I dropped the draft into UDA headquarters and when I came back a few days later the receptionist said: "You can go up and see Andy now. But I'd better tell you... he had a few problems with the play." And I'm making my way up the stairs thinking: was it because of some of the politics I added in, or the bits about history and culture…? And when I sat down in Tyrie's large room, he said: "I really liked the play – except for one thing. I think there's far too much swearing in it." Now, that wasn't what I was expecting! So I trimmed out some of the expletives, but Andy agreed I could keep some in, to make it sound more authentic.

After we had finished the play *Theatre Ireland* requested a copy and, after reading it, asked if they could publish the entire script inside their magazine. In their pre-publicity handout they considered it a very progressive document, and welcomed its intended performance in clubs and pubs as a purposeful use of drama. The play had poems and songs in it, and was probably too lengthy, and it was only then that we realised there was a dearth of actors within the Protestant working class, certainly at that time. Then, to my surprise, Tyrie said: "Could you get your friends in Ballymurphy to perform it and I'll guarantee their safety in loyalist areas?"

[Father Wilson was a co-founder of Ballymurphy People's Theatre, and was always very supportive of the idea of using drama to engender radical political and social debate, and he would also have been very open-minded regarding differing viewpoints being expressed. Furthermore, along with Father Alec Reid, he had promoted, and engaged in, dialogue with unionists and loyalists. He had also written a fictional work, *The Demonstration*, which contained an appeal for working-class unity, something which also figured strongly in *This is It!*]

However, any progress on Tyrie's suggestion stalled after the BBC asked us if we could rewrite the play for radio, but on the condition that it wasn't performed anywhere before it was aired. The BBC involvement ultimately proved fruitless and time-wasting. And although the play was never to see a live performance, either on a stage or on the radio, it *was* used by a number of community groups as a 'reading script'. Eventually, I discarded the poems and the songs and published a shortened version as a pamphlet [which is included in *Island Pamphlets* (*Selection 2)*].

My experience of trying to initiate a dialogue with republicans has been far less productive (with the exception of community activists such as Tommy Gorman, Jim McCorry, Tommy Holland, Michael Doherty, Harry Donaghy and others). My experience mirrored the findings of one academic, who, when he compared instances of new political thinking within Republicanism and Loyalism, found that Republican thinking was generally circumscribed by their end goal of a United Ireland, whereas Loyalists had been forced by circumstances to move outside their normal comfort zone. For example, their (short-lived) concept of an Independent Ulster, the *Beyond the Religious Divide* document, and the *Common Sense* proposals.

11: Rathcoole Self-Help Group

As part of my community outreach I had become a member of the Rathcoole Self-Help Group, located in a large Protestant working-class estate on the northern outskirts of Belfast. The group members were innovative and radical and they regularly lambasted Unionist politicians for the disinterest they showed when it came to working-class needs. One of the group's most notable initiatives was the temporary creation of a 'political party' – the All Night Party – and our candidate, Hagar the Horrible, went around Rathcoole wearing a Viking helmet. Our manifesto made some deliberately outlandish 'election promises': for example, to tilt the world's axis to give Rathcoole more sunshine, to demolish Stormont and rebuild it as a disco in Rathcoole, to hold the next Olympics there too...!

Not surprisingly, the DUP and the UUP were outraged and attacked the group in the media. One angry DUP member wrote to a local newspaper saying that the Group members should all be "horse-whipped out of the area", and in a separate letter the claim was made that we were are all 'Cathal Gouldingites'. Of course, when some of the local UDA discovered that Cathal Goulding had been a former IRA Chief of Staff questions started to be asked, and I had to take a delegation of the Self-Help members over to see Andy Tyrie in UDA headquarters. And Tyrie said to them: "Don't worry, I'll square things on the ground. And keep doing what you are doing; politics here needs to be shaken up."

12: Farset and *Sacrifice on the Somme*

Also, around that time I was developing an interest in Ulster's *shared* history and culture. I had also established a strong association with Farset Youth and Community Project. Indeed, for a while I was a member of its Board. Farset is an interface project which has been highly innovative in its efforts to promote purposeful community-based initiatives. [An account of Farset's many projects is more fully described in one of the pamphlets included in my compilation volume, *Island Pamphlets (Selection 1)*]. One of Farset's initiatives was to take our young people – both Protestant and Catholic – away from their home environments via a youth exchange scheme. The first trip, in 1983, was funded by the British Council, and as part of the programme the young people were taken to Paris where they visited the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe and other tourist sites. However, on the last day of the trip Farset's manager, Jackie Hewitt, realised that they would arrive at the ferry port far too early, and he asked Farset's secretary, Dr Ian Adamson, for any ideas. Ian suggested that they make a detour to the Ulster Tower at Thiepval, on the Somme battlefield.

[*The Ulster Tower was erected in 1921 by public subscription raised in Northern Ireland in memory of the officers and men of the 36th (Ulster) Division, and all Ulstermen, who died in the Great War. It stands on the site of some of the most desperate fighting which took place during the first day of the Battle of the Somme*.]

The group arrived at the Tower to find it locked up. A notice on the door gave the address of a local woman who would open it for visitors on request. At the young people's insistence this woman was located and she duly opened the Tower. The interior was full of spiders and cobwebs, dust was lying thick on the floor and dead flies were everywhere. But the young people seemed fascinated, and when they also visited a nearby cemetery they were soon engrossed walking around the headstones, identifying the different Irish regiments. It was clear to Jackie and Ian that this part of their visit had meant more to the young people than the tourist sights of Paris.

However, on returning home, nothing more was thought about it – until two of the young girls who had been on the trip came to see Jackie. "Jackie, see that Tower place? Can we not clean it up and get it opened again?" And so a Farset Somme Project was initiated, which, because its purpose was to refurbish the Tower and reinstate it as a place of remembrance, managed to receive government funding. As the project developed it soon became clear the massive interest which had been generated. Alongside the renovation of the Tower, an extensive Farset programme now incorporated tours of the Somme area.

To give the young people involved in the Somme Project some awareness of the historical context, Jackie handed me a copy of Cyril Falls' *History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* and asked if I would compile a short booklet from it. Never one to turn down a cross-community opportunity I told Jackie I would, but on the condition that the booklet would not focus solely on the 36th (Ulster) Division but would be broader in scope. Jackie agreed, but, at a meeting some years later, he admitted that at the time he had been concerned that I managed to include in the booklet the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions, James Connolly, the Easter Rising, Partition and the Russian Revolution! At first he thought, as did others, that we wouldn't get away with this. But Farset decided to put it out and see. And, although there were a few negative comments, at a grassroots level the response was extremely positive. That booklet, *Sacrifice on the Somme*, of which 5000 copies were eventually distributed, helped to consolidate Farset's efforts to make the initiative all-inclusive.

The need to make the project all-inclusive stemmed from the fact that across Ireland attitudes to First World War remembrance were deeply divided. To most Irish Nationalists, whether in the Republic or in Northern Ireland – and especially given that the year of the Battle of the Somme, 1916, was also the year of the Easter Rising – any Great War commemoration was largely viewed as the preserve of the Protestant Unionist population of Northern Ireland. Of course, both sides colluded in this perception. Many Protestant Ulstermen would have been loath to acknowledge the role played by Catholic Irishmen – even Catholic Ulstermen – in the Great War. History in Ireland had become selective, exclusive and politicised.

Although I don't have time here to go into the whole history, the Farset Somme project was to help bring about a complete re-evaluation of not only Ulster's, but Ireland's, remembrance of the First World War experience (this grassroots-driven process is described more fully in Island Pamphlet No. 139 *Assorted Anecdotes*).

13: *Ulster: the Hidden History*

Following the positive feedback I received regarding the Somme booklet I next researched and wrote *Ulster: the Hidden History*, which went into two editions, and is now long out of print. This book was an attempt to reveal the *shared* historical and cultural inheritance of the peoples of Ulster. Ian Adamson's Pretani Press published it, and Ian generously allowed complimentary copies to be given to interested community organisations, including prisoner support groups who in turn sent them into the prisons. It generated much positive feedback, but one response in particular took me by surprise.... I happened to be in Rathcoole, when this individual approached me and quietly asked if he could speak to me –

privately. I was intrigued, so we went somewhere out of the earshot of others and sat ourselves down. What he then began to relate was quite unexpected.

> I am in the UVF, and for years now I have hated the IRA with a vengeance. There's no end to their campaign of bombing and killing, much of it directed at the Protestant community. To my mind the IRA just want me, and everyone they consider 'Brits', pushed out of this country. And anyway, according to them the Prods are all 'Planters', who have no right to be in the country in the first place. But I decided: well, if they persist in trying to exterminate my community, I will just fight fire with fire, and do my best to exterminate them in return, because we can't just allow Republicans to drive us into the sea.

He paused for a moment, and then continued:

> And then I read your book. It was a total revelation to me. As I went through it I realised that all this shit about my community not belonging in this country was just that – shit! My community had the same right to be here as the nationalist community. Your book convinced me that *both* communities have an *equal* right to be here. But the main thing I got out of it – on a personal level – is that… in defending my community from Irish Republican attempts to kick us out of the country we were born in, I no longer feel the same urge to retaliate by fighting, or even killing. All I really need to do is stand my ground and argue with republicans instead, now that I feel I can do so on an equal footing with them.

It was a very unexpected conversation, but nevertheless a gratifying one. The pen, I mused to myself after he had departed, can indeed prove mightier than the sword.

Then I decided to paint, in watercolour, a map, *Historic Ulster*, depicting some of Ulster's many historical and archaeological sites. A journalist once said to me: "I was watching TV the other day and [Gerry] Adams was being interviewed in Conway Mill on the Falls Road, and there's your map on the wall behind him. And then when I later happened to go to speak to Andy Tyrie in his office… there's your bloody map on the wall behind *him* as well!" I also produced a Cúchulainn poster. The artwork was done by my brother, taken from a photograph of the statue by sculptor Oliver Sheppard which sits in the GPO in Dublin. Finally, I produced a graphic novel of the Cúchulainn saga.

14: Hazelwood Integrated Schools

I should also mention that Sheila and I were founder-parents of Hazlewood Integrated Schools (where we sent our two children; and two of our four grandchildren also currently attend). And because I had so much going on with the NSPCC and my community outreach, it was Sheila who took on board most of the hard work of cleaning out the first temporary premises, then the move to new premises, as well as a mountain of administrative tasks. She then got an ACE [Action for Community Employment] job there and finally she became the school secretary. She worked there until she retired and absolutely loved it, and many people – staff, parents, pupils – would say that she was the heart and soul of Hazlewood Primary.

15: Island Publications

In 1987 I resigned from NSPCC and decided to start my one-man publishing concern, and Sheila picked the name: 'Island Publications'. My first publication was *20 Years: A Concise Chronology of events in Northern Ireland from 1968–1988*. Commercial type-setting work also helped subsidise my efforts to assist individuals in the community who wished to publish local history booklets or poetry collections. [Indeed, I have edited and helped produce over 50 such publications.]

16: Kinder Community House

Soon after the Berlin Wall went up, the Dutch organisation Pax Christi Kinderhulp ['child-help'] began to bring children from Berlin to Holland to stay with Dutch families during the summer months. Then, a few years after our own conflict erupted, they offered to take 120 children from NSPCC's caseloads on a similar scheme, where our children were placed, two to a household, with Dutch host-parents. In their fund-raising efforts Pax Christi found the Dutch public so supportive of the Northern Ireland project that they eventually ended up with far more finances than required for the summer scheme. So, now that I was no longer with the NSPCC but was still heavily engaged at a grassroots level, they asked if I could develop a suitable community-based project in Northern Ireland which they could fund.

I interviewed a dozen community groups and what most of them wanted was: a residential centre which was inexpensive to hire, where there was no pressure to engage in cross-community work if they didn't want to, and which wasn't located near amusement arcades which would put an intolerable strain on a family's finances. I put the idea to the Dutch and after their go-ahead I viewed a number of properties and finally settled on a large rambling house which sat next to the shore in the village of Killough, County Down. Killough itself had only one shop but the area was a great

place for walks and the house itself had two extensive gardens where different activities could be organised. The Dutch purchased the building which was named Kinder Community House, and for which I acted as co-ordinator. The agreement I had with the user-groups was that in return for it being kept inexpensive – at £1 per person per night I think it was the cheapest residential facility in the UK and Ireland – they would keep it clean, and not create any unnecessary problems for me.

The project, launched in 1990, turned out to be highly successful. However, it soon became evident that there were three very different types of group using it. The first category of groups did more than was asked of them: they cleaned the premises thoroughly, they arrived up with extra pieces of furniture, and they often came down to help me freshen up the paint. (Sheila and I, along with our two children, had painted the entire building; Sheila afterwards joked: "I never want to see magnolia ever again!") The second category included groups that just did the minimum: if they used four tables in the dining room they cleaned four tables, if they used two bedrooms they didn't vacuum beyond that. But the third category of groups, unfortunately, misused it. They would throw cutlery into the bushes where it got lost, they would stub cigarettes into the duvets, they would set off the fire extinguishers… One group – all church youth workers in their twenties – ran around throwing food at each other, and on the walls! Teenagers belonging to another group broke into a neighbour's car.

I don't want to paint an overly negative picture because the majority of groups enjoyed and benefited from their experience. And I don't necessarily blame the leaders of the 'problem' groups because most of these leaders had been well-intentioned but just lacked any real group-management skills. But, unfortunately, that minority of groups caused us to increase our overnight charge. Part of this was used to reimburse a Killough resident who acted as an occasional caretaker, for up until then I had been trying to supervise and organise everything from Belfast. More recently the Covid lockdown hit the project very badly. Currently, the legal paperwork is being prepared for the premises to be taken over by WAVE Trauma Group, who work with victims and survivors of the Troubles.

17: I decide to launch *Island Pamphlets*

Anyway, it's now time to move on to the major initiative to which I have devoted the last 30 years – my series of 'Island Pamphlets', of which, to date, I have produced 139 titles and distributed 202,500 copies widely at a grassroots community level.

So, the following are the diverse elements which came together and eventually saw me launch the initiative:

(1) Way back in 1968 a friend and I were in a pub in a Protestant working-class area of Belfast, discussing politics with two young loyalists. (Only a few months later, as events on the ground escalated, a political discussion in this same venue would have been extremely unwise.) Now, when I say 'loyalists', although the two were very anti-republican they were nevertheless extremely critical of Unionist politicians, especially those who many Protestants disparagingly term 'the fur-coat brigade' for their middle/upper-class lack of any concern for working-class communities. Then, at one stage during our discussion one of the young loyalists lifted four beer-mats and proceeded to place them on the table in front of us, in four separate positions: (A) where they felt *we* would like them to be politically (i.e. working in unity with the Catholic working class); (B) where they felt they themselves were at; (C) where we (my friend and I) had travelled from in *our* political development; and finally (D) where *they* had started out from in their own attitudes. As I said, the beer-mats had been unequally spaced apart, and the young Loyalist drew attention to the irregular positioning...

(A) (C) (B) (D)

... and then said, "So, *even though we are nowhere near where you would like us to be*, we have *still moved further than you*. It was an enlightening moment, to say the least. And I realised, even back then, that I should not be fixated on an end-point, but should focus on *creating a process* which would *take people towards that end-point*. Although it would be many years before I launched my Island Pamphlets series, that encounter was a pivotal point on the journey I would eventually take.

(2) The extensive readings I had undertaken – referred to at the very beginning of this interview – which had such a strong impact on my evolving political awareness – revealed to me that alongside whatever the political and academic establishments might be saying, at a grassroots level there was often a completely different, and often overlooked, narrative. I believed that in the midst of our own tragic conflict the same situation existed, and I felt that there was an urgent need for some means, some vehicle, through which the largely unheard voices of ordinary people could be articulated.

(3) Tied in with this new awareness was that in most of the periods of radical social change which I had studied I had also found evidence of a grassroots-led debate, whether through the pamphleteering which was a prominent feature of the French Revolution, or the radical discussions which had taken place in working-class community centres – the *casas del pueblo* – in Spain prior to the 1936 civil war and revolution, or even the café debates in Prague during the 'Prague Spring'

before the Warsaw Pact tanks moved in. And I thought: well, what have we got here in our own conflict? Perhaps a couple of progressive grassroots-produced documents, but they tended to be 'here today, gone tomorrow'. Most of the other material was just 'war news': *An Phoblacht/Republican News* for republicans, and *Combat* and *Ulster* for loyalists; but there was nothing really which could facilitate a genuine cross-community dialogue. As a first step, I determined to see if I could organise a small discussion group: in May 1988 I sought to bring individuals such as Fr Des Wilson and Andy Tyrie (who had recently resigned from the UDA) into what I described to them as a 'cross-community think tank'. However, for a variety of reasons the initiative never got off the ground. I would have to wait a while before trying again.

(4) And partly because of the impact the Solidarity pamphlets had made on my own political development, it seemed a natural progression to link the 'think tank' idea with the production of pamphlets: these would be the *vehicle* whereby the think tank discussions could be shared with a wider grassroots audience.

(5) Another important element was the advent of personal computers, which allowed home-based individuals to engage in 'desk-top publishing'. A close friend, Paul Campbell, was one of the first to use an Apple Macintosh commercially in Northern Ireland, and he encouraged me to acquire one. And this opened up a whole new field of publishing possibilities.

(6) But before any 'think tank' could be initiated I began to reorganise some of the historical material contained in my book *Ulster: the Hidden History* to suit a pamphlet format: *Ulster's Scottish Connection*, *Ulster's European Heritage*, *Ulster's Shared Heritage*, along with a shortened version of my Farset publication *Sacrifice on the Somme*, which I decided might possibly be my first pamphlet title. However, in December 1991, I happened to be talking to loyalist ex-prisoner Billy Hutchinson. We were both discussing how we could move things forward and the idea of convening think tanks again came up, for it was something Billy had also been considering. We kept the idea alive throughout 1992 and then Billy informed me that an important interface conference was coming up, a record of which would be ideal material for my pamphlet series. And it was this conference report, *Life on the Interface,* which became Island Pamphlet No.1. It was quickly followed up with the history-themed titles already in preparation, and then very soon afterwards the 'Think Tank'-based pamphlets really took off.

I should also point out that the bulk of the topics addressed in the pamphlets did *not*

originate with me. People would approach me and ask me: 'could you tackle such and such an issue', or 'could you do one for *our* area?' In fact, I heard that one community worker once said to another: "We'd really need to do something about self-harming among young people," and the other replied: "Check first that Mike Hall hasn't already done one or isn't in the process of doing one." So the pamphlets became the vehicle that I had hoped they would be. And the small-group format proved it could engender a far more progressive and diverse discussion than you would normally get from larger public debates.

Most of the first dozen Island Pamphlets were funded from my own savings, apart from a few titles for which community groups managed to obtain sponsorship. I was told by numerous funding organisations that they could not assist me as I was working as an individual and they could only support groups. In response, I told them that my very lack of organisational 'baggage' had allowed me to build up trust on both sides of our communal divide, but this didn't sway them. However, eventually a working arrangement was agreed with Farset, funding was finally awarded, and the 'Farset Community Think Tanks Project' came into being. Many of the Think Tank pamphlets have been funded by EU 'peace money', administered through the NI Community Relations Council and the International Fund for Ireland. (And, more recently, with funding from the Fellowship of Messines Association.)

18: The 'Think Tank' Process

So, what are the actual mechanics? As I said, I would be contacted by a group with a request to assist them in confronting a specific grassroots-related issue, or perhaps look at what was happening within their own local community. I would suggest to them that they bring together a small number of people (usually no more than 10) who were willing to explore the issue. I would also advise them to make this group inclusive, as far as possible, of different (even opposing) viewpoints on the issue; and also to have the group reflect different age groups and have a gender balance.

As I said, I had deliberately decided on the small-group format as I often found public debates to be a negative and even counter-productive experience. As Farset's manager, Jackie Hewitt, once said to me:

> I have attended many conferences where speaker after speaker got up and said just what I, and everybody else, expected them to say, or what we all already knew. And there was a sense of disappointment that something more productive hadn't been gained from bringing together such a large group of people. To be honest, I find far more innovative thoughts and challenging ideas being expressed in the Think Tank

pamphlets – and yet there are perhaps only a dozen people involved in each. Maybe when people sit in a small group they find it easier to voice different opinions, explore new ideas.

Often a community group will have an agreed agenda they wish their discussions to follow. At other times I might help them determine the best way their topic might be addressed. If, during the discussions, I feel their focus is becoming too narrow, I might ask challenging questions in order to open up a broader debate.

When I am facilitating an area-based discussion group, I often encourage the group members, before they begin to air their political/cultural views, to 'paint a picture' of themselves and their community. Reminiscences about community life, especially *prior* to the Troubles, often resonates with people on the 'other side' of the interface, and helps establish at least some sense of shared experience before more divisive views are brought into the frame.

Each small-group discussion usually lasts about one and a half hours, and there will normally be three of these per Think Tank. I transcribe everything which has been said, and then present the group with an edited draft. (I edit, I do not censor; the editing is purely to make the resulting pamphlet more accessible to readers.) When I present the draft, I ask the group two questions: (1) Is it an accurate account of what was said, and (2) even if it *is* accurate, does it present their views in the way they had expected? I remind the group that I am neither a journalist nor an academic: my purpose is to assist the group members articulate their views (often for the first time) in a way they feel comfortable with.

[The only occasion I deviated from the 'three meetings in a row' format was during a Think Tank involving nationalist community activists who were discussing Orange Order marches, when I felt it would be useful for participants to reflect on the tenor of the comments being made. I prepared a draft of the discussion after the second meeting and passed it around for debate. As I had expected, it elicited comments like: "When I read what I had said I realised I must sound as inflexible as I claim the Orangemen are!" I told the group that I wasn't expecting them to expunge such comments – as they reflected genuine community-held attitudes – but in the final discussion they could perhaps – but only if they wanted to – add in more accommodating viewpoints.]

The finished pamphlets are A5 in size and between 32 and 36 pages in length. This size and page-length I consider more accessible and manageable to a general readership than a large A4 publication.

Soon after the first pamphlets were produced and widely disseminated a few individuals would say to me (in almost identical words): "Mike, see if you had

blanked out certain words, and removed street names, I would have been hard pressed to decide whether your last pamphlet was about the Catholic working class or the Protestant working class." Indeed, it was such comments which led to the first 'joint' Think Tank discussions taking place; and, eventually, 'cross-community' discussions soon became routine.

And when I have been recording the experience of victims of the Troubles, which I was often asked to do on a one-to-one basis in the privacy of their own homes, I have heard some very poignant personal stories. So much so that when I am later transcribing the recordings I am left feeling quite emotional. But I tell myself: this person has bravely exposed their grief to me, the least I can do is to get their story down onto the printed page in such a way that a reader can readily empathise with that person's pain. And that is what often happens. I have had people – mainly females, I must admit – say to me: "Michael, see parts of that last pamphlet – I cried my eyes out!"

19: The impact of the Think Tank/pamphlet initiative

I have identified six categories in which I feel the Think Tank/pamphlet project has made a positive impact:

(1) individual

(2) group

(3) local community

(4) cross-community

(5) opening up debate on contested narratives

(6) interest from those outside Northern Ireland

Let me give examples from each of the above categories:

(1) The small-group experience can often take each participant on a *personal* journey. Participants are coming into a situation where, perhaps for the first time, they are being given the freedom and encouragement to express and articulate their views, and even voice their personal anger. To give one example out of many: A participant in one of the Think Tanks was a woman whose father had been murdered by republicans. The trauma she experienced had severely blighted her teenage years. She also felt that her personal story wasn't accorded any real value. For example, the day after the 1994 IRA ceasefire the world's media descended on community groups throughout Northern Ireland, including hers, and a reporter asked her: "What are your hopes for the future?" She began her reply: "Look, this ceasefire is only a day old; I have a lot of pain to come to terms with yet." Upon which the reporter pointedly turned away from

her and addressed his question to others in the room. Like so many in the media, he had no real interest in her story. And when she told another reporter that she still felt hatred towards the IRA, he responded: "Oh, we couldn't use that!" Anyway, during the Think Tank discussions, and still feeling bitter towards the IRA, she was frequently at odds with some of the more accommodating views expressed by other participants, and when I presented the draft of the proposed pamphlet I expected her to object to my inclusion of many of these views. But because her personal story and views had been *included as well*, on an *equal* footing, she accepted that *all* stories and *all* views had a right to be heard. Some time later, when I asked her what her experience of participating in the Think Tank discussions had been, she replied: "Michael, I can sum it up in one word." Now, I was expecting she might say 'enlightening', or 'challenging', or such, but that one word was… 'therapeutic'.

(2) After a young girl had welcomed the experience of being able to express herself freely (as part of a group which was largely adult in composition) she was very eager that I facilitate a Think Tank/pamphlet for the young people in her West Belfast youth group. When I eventually sat down with these young people, one of them asked me: "What would you like us to talk about?" To which I responded: "No, no; the question is the other way round – what would *you* all want to talk about?" "But – what like?" they said. "Well," I replied, "if you saw a small booklet in your local shop, all about the young people of this area, what would need to be in it to make you want to read it?" And then the replies came thick and fast: it would need to address the problem of youth suicide, or drugs, or being chased away from street corners, or the disinterest shown by some of their school teachers, or the hypocrisy of those adults who came out of local pubs shouting and fighting but yet accused the young people of anti-social behaviour... "There you are," I said, "you have just listed the topics we can talk about." And they proceeded to do so with enthusiasm. And by being able to discuss the issues which really mattered to them, it helped them gel as a group. And, indeed, I later learned that they were very enthusiastic about sharing 'our wee pamphlet' with other youth groups.

(3) Shankill Road Community activist May Blood once made a telling comment to me which confirmed that the parameters of debate could be shifted at a local community level:

> When you brought out that last Shankill pamphlet [in which the participants had looked to the future] I can tell you there were a few raised eyebrows about some of the things said in it... it seemed a bit radical for

the Shankill area. And yet, a couple of months later I was at a meeting and was surprised that people were openly discussing issues which up until then had seemed taboo. When I pointed this out, the response was: 'Well, if the Shankill Think Tank can tackle these subjects, so can we.'

(4) Initially the pamphlets were seen as a means of learning about and understanding not only one's own community but the 'other' community. There came a stage, however, when community activists began to see the pamphlets as a vehicle for *reaching out* across the 'divide'. For example, nationalist community activists in Ardoyne, faced with the total breakdown in community relations which resulted from the Holy Cross primary school blockade of 2001, requested that a Think Tank be assembled for the purpose of exploring attitudes to cross-community contact within the local Catholic community, and then have me distribute the resulting pamphlet across the religious 'interface'. This was done, and the response from the Protestant side was generally positive, for people there were heartened to learn that many in the Catholic community still desired an accommodation, just as they did.

(5) The Think Tank discussions can often tackle deeply-divisive narratives. In 2022, when First Minister Michelle O'Neill claimed that the nationalist community had had 'no alternative' to IRA violence she was lambasted by Unionist politicians and others for her comments. But this topic had already been addressed by republican activists in a Think Tank discussion in 2015, during which a former INLA member stated:

> We also have to be more honest about what went on. We have to challenge notions that have remained unquestioned. For example, republicans – and I include myself – often said that we engaged in armed struggle because we 'had no option'. But most of my childhood and teenage mates didn't get involved in the republican struggle, that's a fact. Most people in this country didn't get involved in the struggle. We need to nail the lie that 'we didn't have a choice but to engage in armed struggle'. We did! We either didn't like those choices or we thought that armed struggle was the best choice. But we *did* have choices. Everybody who is involved in armed struggle thinks violence is justified, and that those who question it are just wishy-washy, not as true an Irish person as them. Those are the things we need to challenge within our own community. And loyalism has to do the same, about their violence. We all need to

challenge these myths. [Island Pamphlet No.108, *A Process of Analysis (2): The Catholic/Nationalist/Republican Community*]

In the same discussion reference was made to journalist Peter Taylor's interview with Gerry Adams for a documentary 'Who Won the War?' [BBC1, 29.09.14]. In response to Taylor's observation that "violence paid" in the IRA's pursuit of political objectives, Adams replied: "You show me anywhere in the world where people have won either a modicum of decency and rights... that it didn't happen after bloodletting." However, in the pamphlet itself numerous examples were listed of *non-violent* revolutions: Gandhi's 'Salt Satyagraha' (India, 1930), The 'Carnation Revolution' (Portugal, 1974), The 'Yellow Revolution' (Philippines, 1986), The 'Singing Revolution' (Baltic States, 1987-9), The 'Velvet Revolution' (Czechoslovakia, 1989), The 'Peaceful Revolution' (East Germany, 1989). While addressing such divisive narratives, there will always remain deep disagreements, but at least the Think Tank discussions have provided a vehicle whereby such narratives can be honestly and openly debated.

(6) Numerous researchers, authors, PhD students and others have utilised the pamphlet series, either after having been given them while visiting community groups here, or having downloaded them directly from the internet via the University of Ulster's CAIN Archive. The pamphlets have even reached Japan. One Japanese university based one of its Irish history modules around the series, and arranged for a large consignment of the pamphlets to be posted to Japan. Closer to home, Ben Walsh, while preparing a GCSE textbook, *The Struggle for Peace in Northern Ireland*, wrote to me to say: "I particularly like the way your pamphlets get below the stereotypes to reveal more than the simplistic Orange and Green picture portrayed here in England and in the rest of the world." One important contact was with two groups of young Palestinians and Israelis, who had come to Belfast in 2003 to engage jointly in a series of workshops conducted by local conflict resolution practitioner Joe Camplisson. Two pamphlets resulted from that engagement: No. 57 *Reflections on Violence*, and No. 58 *Making road maps to Peace*. The joint group decided to have a large quantity of No. 58 posted to Israel.

20: A few anecdotes

I was once walking down the Shankill Road and well-known community activist Jackie Redpath stopped me and said: "Mike, we're out of the wee pamphlet," and I thought he meant the Shankill Think Tank one. I said: "Jackie, I think I'm out of it too." He said: "No, not *our* one… the Falls one; there's been a lot of interest in it

around here." A few weeks later I was in West Belfast and someone said: "Mike, have you any more copies of that wee pamphlet?" And I knew to wait and ask: "The Falls one?" "No no, the Shankill one."

I would also deliver pamphlets to the Green Cross Art and Bookshop on the Falls Road and on one particular visit I said to the manager: "This pamphlet is from the Shankill Think Tank and there's some anti-republican stuff in it." "Oh, that's okay," she said, "it's one of your pamphlet series, just put it with the rest." Not long after that I had to visit the Union Jack Shop on the Newtownards Road, and I said to the guy who ran it: "Jim, this particular pamphlet is from the Falls Think Tank and there's some anti-loyalist stuff in it." And he used almost identical words: "That's no problem – sure it's one of your pamphlet series."

So there was an acceptance that I wasn't taking sides.... Well, I suppose I *was* taking sides, I was taking the side of ordinary people, the people who had been marginalised and disempowered, not to mention having been traumatised by decades of unrelenting violence.

On one occasion when I was trying to bring loyalists and republicans into a joint Think Tank I approached a well-known loyalist community worker who was a leading member of the UPRG [Ulster Political Research Group], which offered political guidance to the UDA. He said to me: "Mike, I'm happy to take part but when certain people hear of me sitting down with republicans, I could end up in a skip! What I'll need you to do is write a letter *inviting* me to your Think Tank – because people around here trust what you are doing – and I'm confident they'll say: 'One of Mike Hall's Think Tanks? That's okay, go ahead'." So you can create *a safe space* within which people from opposing political backgrounds feel more able to engage with one another.

And although I do not censor the comments made during a discussion, at times I will try to protect certain individuals – specifically *non*-participants – who might find themselves mentioned. In such cases I work with the participants to re-word comments in such a way that while their genuine sentiments are left intact, no unwitting third party is unnecessarily denigrated (apart from politicians, of course).

I have always viewed the pamphlets as growing *with* the group. I would always let the discussion unfold naturally. However, if I thought the discussion was getting stuck in a rut, I would throw in a few devil's-advocate-type comments to stimulate debate. I would also sometimes relay to the group what people 'across the divide' were saying on a certain issue, knowing that this would invariably elicit a spirited response. For example: "By the way, when I was on the Falls the other day they were saying they thought you lot over here believed such and such...."

"No, no! When you are next over there, tell them we don't think like that at all…." I suppose I was acting like a facilitator going between people in different rooms.

Because I was distributing so many pamphlets around the community network Farset offered to employ someone to deliver them for me. [At one time I had over 80 community groups on my 'distribution list', and key individuals like Sinn Féin's Tom Hartley and UDA leader Andy Tyrie would also give copies to their associates.] I turned down Farset's offer, because I felt that distribution was an integral part of my work and that my going around the different groups on each side of the 'conflict interface' was an important form of networking, especially as groups would often ask me what the 'other side' had thought of *their* last pamphlet.

I had also wanted to make the pamphlets available to the general public through the main bookshops, but that proved to be a frustrating experience. Gardner's on Botanic Avenue had sold hundreds of pamphlets when it was still family-owned, but when Easons took it over they declined to stock them. Dillons too had sold hundreds of copies but when Dillons became Waterstones the new manager also declined to stock any. I wrote to Waterstones' headquarters in London, saying it was strange that Belfast's biggest bookshop had declined to take material funded by European peace money. Although in their reply they claimed that my comments had been taken "extremely seriously", and that my concerns would be forwarded to the Belfast branch manager, this exchange of letters ultimately achieved nothing. Finally, I had offered some pamphlets, on a 'sale-or-return' basis, to a local chain of newsagents/bookshops, but the manager turned them down too, saying: "I'm sorry, I'm afraid my shelves are basically Mars-Bars-orientated."

21: A few final comments from participants about the project's impact

> When you first read the draft you get a bit of a shock. You go: did I really say that! Somehow seeing it down in black and white makes you realise how embittered you must seem to others. Sometimes we all say things automatically without really thinking about their impact.
>
> The pamphlets help you to move forward. In the first few pages you read all these hardline statements which you naturally agree with, then you begin to see other opinions being expressed which initially you might have rejected, but, in the context in which they are said, make you pause and think. And then at the end of the document you can see how you [as editor] have sort of summarised the different views and highlighted possible ways of moving forward, and you say to yourself: Yes, I think I could live with that.

People trust the project not to have a hidden agenda, or to be self-seeking. They appreciate that you [as facilitator] are always careful to ensure that people are happy with the final document. They see it as a process, in which their own development is just as important as the printed product. More importantly, it is a process over which the participants have full ownership at all times.

22: Some Feedback on Island Pamphlets

This slim volume [*Life on the Interface*] is refreshing in the totally open and honest style of its writing. There is no attempt to disguise the disturbing aspects of the conference or the eruption of emotive issues, which reminds the reader this was not just an academic debate but was concerned with real issues which affected and divided two communities of real people. [But rather than being] tempted to despair... this pamphlet has the opposite effect. It shows that the process of dialogue is essential. (Pauline Murphy, *Books Ireland*, May 1994)

There are absolutely no holds barred here. This [*Ulster's Protestant Working Class*] is the authentic voice of ordinary people, not filtered or interpreted by intellectuals or academics. In so far as we do not hear enough of that authentic voice, or have it presented with scorn or ridicule, this little document is invaluable and should be read by everyone concerned. And if you are not concerned, why not? (*Books Ireland*, December 1994)

The Falls document [*Ourselves Alone?*] should be compulsory reading for everyone interested in a way forward for this community. (Roy Garland, *Irish News*, 3 June 1996)

Island Pamphlets have patiently contributed a lot to reconciliation in the North. (*Books Ireland*, Sept 1996)

Your pamphlet *Death of the Peace Process?* is the only work I've come across so far that gives voice to the people on the ground in Northern Ireland. (*Letter* from Ann-Sofi Jakobsson, Uppsala University, Sweden, July 1997)

This booklet [*Are we not part of this City too?*] should be required reading for any nationalist who sincerely wants to address the apprehensions of our Protestant minority [in Derry]. The general themes expressed contain proof that there are many in the unionist community who want to search for a way forward, who desire to co-operate with their nationalist fellow citizens in the task of building a more inclusive and settled city. ('Onlooker', *Derry Journal*, 27th July 1999)

[Michael Hall's] numerous pamphlets have played a vital role in making contact between [Northern Ireland's Unionist and Nationalist communities] – a grassroots engagement which has opened ways of communication and understanding which, otherwise, would not have existed. (Wesley Hutchinson, *Espaces de l'imaginaire unioniste nord-irlandais*, Presses Universitaires de Caen, France, 1999)

A group of Americans visited our group and we gave them some of the booklets. They wrote to us a few weeks later saying how much they helped them gain a better picture of what was happening here at community level. That's what those booklets do, they give you time to sit and digest what communities are really saying about their problems. But, even more importantly, being involved in a Think Tank also helped *us* get a better grasp of what our own community was all about. And reading the booklets produced by the Nationalist community gave us a better understanding of that community too. I like the small-group approach. I have been to public meetings which turned into slanging matches, and people maybe got in a few words all night, but never a real opportunity to express themselves. The small-group context gives you a better opportunity to really debate issues. In the booklets you can see points being thoroughly explored. Being involved in that debate also gives people confidence, and helps change attitudes. (George Newell, community activist, East Belfast, 2003)

I think these booklets are an excellent way of getting views and ideas out. I also believe that the entire series will be very important in the historical sense, in that they will be seen as an accurate reflection of our working-class communities, Protestant and Catholic. (Paul Little, Irish Republican Socialist Party and community activist, 2004)

I think one of the difficulties for all of us is that there is a lack of understanding about the 'other' community. And there is work being done to bring about understanding; such as the pamphlets Michael Hall has been producing – these have been very helpful in that regard. (Nelson McCausland MLA, Democratic Unionist Party, 2004)

It is good to get people's interpretations of what happened to them. Often their recollections are so different – and all the more reason for everybody hearing them. We need to have people talking, and we need then to have some way of making those who have control of resources listen. These Think Tank discussions and publications have done nearly everything that can be done to provide a unique framework within which that talking can be encouraged and publicised. (Fr. Desmond Wilson, community activist, Ballymurphy, West Belfast, 2004)

[The Think Tank/pamphlet series] seems to me to be an epic and unique initiative. I can't think of a similar attempt to facilitate reflection, dialogue and new political thinking in a post-conflict situation. (*Letter* from Dr Bill McDonnell, University of Sheffield, 2007)

Michael Hall's Think Tanks have given many people, in both communities, the opportunity to articulate their hopes and fears, and confront issues in an honest but always challenging manner. (May Blood, *Watch My Lips, I'm Speaking!* Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 2007)

Your pamphlets [*A process of analysis* (mini-series)] are very impressive. As a former publisher I admired the quality and presentation of these works. You lay out the problems well and examine clearly the responses. Above all, I was impressed by their content. You raise key issues and were able to assemble significant local players to look at these matters. For some time there has been a serious dearth of discussion on the matters dividing us. The politicians, especially now, have not been tackling these issues. So congratulations on all your efforts in promoting debate on these issues. (*e-mail* from Professor Emeritus Brian M. Walker, June 2018)

Mike, thank you for giving me your pamphlet [*Celebrating a shared heritage*] at the book launch a few weeks ago – such a refreshing, lucid, balanced read. (*e-mail* from historian Jonathan Bardon, February 2019)

23: I lose my soulmate

In March 2023, after battling cancer for a year, Sheila died. In their numerous messages on social media many former Hazelwood pupils talked about her as being their 'other mummy'. But her most important role of 'mother' was to our two children, Christopher and Helen, who she and I were always so proud of as we watched them grow up into caring, sensitive, creative adults. We were delighted too when they found loving partners in Emma-Claire and Cormac. And, of course, as a 'nana' Sheila was devoted to our four very special grandchildren: Jackson, Haydyn, Felix and Annie.

With Sheila having been taken out of my life I must admit I struggle to find the same drive for my community work. However, I have been slowly getting back to my writing, mostly reflecting on some of my grassroots experiences.

24: Final thoughts

When I first commenced my Island Pamphlets series in 1993 I never imagined that I would still be producing them over thirty years later. As I pointed out elsewhere in this narrative, 139 titles have been produced to date, containing within them over two million words of oral testimony, and 202,500 copies have been distributed around the community network in Northern Ireland, and indeed beyond.

And the range of groups and topics which have been embraced within the series has been extensive. Some Think Tanks were area-based, reflecting the experiences of people living on either side of different conflict interfaces. Some were focused on specific sectors within the community – loyalists, republicans, victims, young people, senior citizens, community activists, ex-prisoners, women's groups, people with disabilities, etc. – while others tackled pertinent issues such as cross-community work, marching and parades, cross-border relationships, shared history and culture, or the 'peace process'.

The pamphlet series is a world away from my first venture into pamphleteering. My 1973 document *Ireland, Dead or Alive?* was rhetoric-filled and imbued with the self-certainties of youth. In the Think Tank pamphlets, however, I strive to allow the participants to speak for themselves, and refrain from passing judgement. Assisting victims and the disempowered to have their voices heard came naturally to me, but back in 1973 I could never have imagined that I would also be sitting down with Loyalists, Republicans, Orangemen – and others with whom I have fundamental disagreements – and assisting them to articulate and clarify their views for the benefit of the wider community. But I had come to realise that before this society can really move forward, we must all begin to listen to one another properly – and even *hear ourselves* properly. Only when all sections of this society feel that they are being accorded an equal input will we begin to find ways of reaching a lasting accommodation which will permit us to move into a more secure future.

All 139 titles published to date are listed on the University of Ulster's CAIN Archive, where over 70 can be downloaded as pdfs.

https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/islandpublications

The two compilation volumes, *Island Pamphlets: (Selection 1) & (Selection 2)* are available as a set (£16.00 including postage) from eBay or directly from myself