Comment

Truth and tribalism

The case for consigning Northern Ireland's past to oblivion is strong - but the dead deserve better

Fintan O'Toole
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In 1972, the worst year of the Northern Ireland conflict, the poet John Hewitt contemplated the future difficulty of dealing with the dead. He could not, he wrote, ask Ireland to pray for them, "for prayer in this green island / is tarnished with stale breath". He could not even ask that the dead be remembered, "for your memory is a cruel web / threaded from thorn to thorn across / a hedge of dead bramble". Hewitt knew well that, though the Troubles had deep structural roots, they were kicked off in 1966 by a confluence of contradictory acts of remembrance: Catholics marking the anniversary of the 1916 rising in Dublin, Protestants the Battle of the Somme in the same year.

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When remembrance is as much part of the problem as of the solution, it is not surprising that, a decade after the Belfast agreement, the task of finding an official way to remember the 3,600 dead of the Troubles has barely begun. Though the idea of some kind of truth and reconciliation commission has been raised again and again, nothing has been done to make it a reality.

When Peter Hain, the former Northern Ireland secretary, established a new group under Lord Eames, the recently retired Church of Ireland primate, and the former priest Denis Bradley, to "seek a consensus across the community in Northern Ireland on the best way to deal with the legacy of the past", the tentative language hinted at the anxieties that still surround the issue. There was a similar reaction to the revelation yesterday that Nuala O'Loan, the Northern Ireland ombudsman, was re-examining files from John Stalker's "shoot to kill" inquiry. The fear is that instead of healing wounds, any process will merely re-open them.

Had Hewitt lived longer, after all, he would have witnessed the ultimate obscenity of funerals and commemorations becoming both targets and sources of violence. The IRA killed 11 people at a Remembrance Sunday ceremony in Enniskillen in 1987. The Loyalist Michael Stone killed three men at a Republican funeral in Milltown cemetery in Belfast

in 1988. A few days later, two British corporals were killed by mourners when they accidentally drove into the funeral cortege of one of Stone's victims. The Somme commemoration at Drumcree churchyard became an occasion of violence throughout the mid-90s.

Given this tendency of Northern Ireland's graveyards to double as minefields, there would seem to be a strong case for oblivion. Successful monuments to people who have died in national traumas - think of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Vietnam wall in Washington, or the superb Oklahoma City memorial - rest on a foundation of shared grief. When that foundation is absent, you get monstrosities such as the Valle de los Caidos outside Madrid that purports to commemorate the dead of the Spanish civil war but really serves to mark Franco's triumph. It is not unreasonable to fear that Northern Ireland's continuing sectarian divisions make a Valle de los Caidos more likely than a Yad Vashem.

Yet that very division is the reason why Northern Ireland doesn't really have the option of oblivion. Because conflict has been underpinned by selective remembering in which grief becomes grievance, it is foolish to believe that if we ignore the recent past it will go away. In the Irish experience, both nationalists and unionists have been all too adept at constructing versions of the past in which they feature only as victims, never as victimisers. There is every reason to believe that, without a serious collective attempt to deal with the legacy of the Troubles, it too will be assimilated into competing tribal myths.

Indeed, this process is under way already. The murders that have been investigated, or for which (like that of Pat Finucane) there are continuing demands for public inquiries, are those that were perpetrated or colluded in by the state. There are good reasons why this should be so, but the cumulative effect is to distort the memory of the conflict. A little over one-tenth of the victims were killed by the security forces. The overwhelming majority died at the hands of paramilitaries.

So far, the paramilitaries have yet to face up to their own actions. Republicans still configure their campaign as a

"war" against the army and police, even though a majority of their victims were civilians. Loyalists still maintain the lie that most of those they targeted were IRA men, rather than innocent Catholics.

The "abject and true remorse" offered by the loyalist leader Gusty Spence when he declared the UVF and UDA ceasefires has yet to be translated even into the decommissioning of those groups' weapons. Sinn Fein, which is now itself in government, remains evasive about its past, claiming, for example, that its leader Gerry Adams was never in the IRA.

If there is not to be an effective hierarchy of victims, all of the bereaved and maimed have to be given the same chance to give their accounts and receive whatever accountability is possible. Finding a way to do this is hard for the same reasons that it is necessary - it demands an approach to the past that is not exclusive; and it requires a belief that truth is a value in itself, rather than a form of tribal vindication. A process that could meet those needs would not merely honour the dead, but disarm the habits of thought that helped to kill them.

· Fintan O'Toole is a columnist with the Irish Times

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