

“BAPTISM IN BELFAST”

Jack Deacy

(New York journalist Jack Deacy remembers Bloody Friday in Belfast in July 1972)

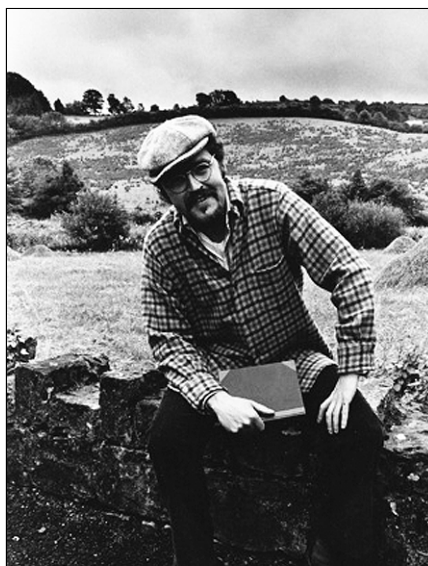
FORTY THREE YEARS ago, I was a New York journalist in Belfast to cover “the troubles” in Northern Ireland. I had been to Northern Ireland many times since the conflict began in 1969. I knew many of the players involved on both sides and I knew the city of Belfast well. In 1972 I decided to move to Northern Ireland and spend a year there to cover the conflict up close.

The date of Friday, July 21, 1972—my second day in Belfast—is seared in my memory. That morning I was in Ballymurphy, a sprawling Catholic community, an Irish Republican Army (IRA) stronghold set on high ground overlooking the city of Belfast. Ballymurphy was also one of a few “no go areas” that the British Army and Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) had agreed not to enter.

I had spent the night before in a modest row house owned by Seamus Drumm, an IRA gunman and member of Ballymurphy’s notorious A Company. In the morning hours, there was a lot of activity in Ballymurphy, trucks and cars stopping at designated houses and then moving on again.

At about 20 minutes before two in the afternoon, residents began to gather in groups in front of their houses. They had a good view of the city center of Belfast below. Everyone waited.

At exactly two o’clock, the sound of an exploding car bomb carried up the hill. A great cheer went up from the crowd. A man nearby started counting. “That’s one,” he shouted. A few minutes later, the flat thud of another bomb exploding in the center of the city. “That’s two,” the man shouted. Cheers and applause. Over the next hour a car bomb exploded every few minutes until the man



stopped counting at 20. A massive grey-black cloud now drifted slowly over the city.

The I.R.A had placed and exploded 20 car bombs within a 30-block radius in the center of Belfast. Nine dead and more than 150 injured. Among the dead were a 14-year-old boy and his mother. They were out shopping. Others died in the city’s main bus terminal waiting for a bus. Absolute terror and death in a small space.

The day became known as Bloody Friday. *It was my baptism in Belfast.*

Two days before I met Jack McKinney, a friend and columnist for the Philadelphia Daily News, in Dublin. McKinney had spent the previous year reporting from Belfast and I was to take over his apartment there. International sports journalists and other swells were in Dublin to attend the heavyweight fight between Muhammad Ali and a journeyman named Al “Blue” Lewis. Jack McKinney was a character out of “The Front Page”. He loved the action. He was handsome, charming, an intellectual with street smarts who

“Is there a life before death”

SLOGAN ON A WALL IN BALLYMURPHY

loved to drink, eat well, tell stories, and chase women. McKinney had erudite tastes. His favourite things were boxing and opera and he was a commentator and critic of both. And as I was soon to discover, he believed in getting emotionally involved in the stories he covered. He took sides. In Northern Ireland his side was the Catholic minority.

In Dublin, he had IRA man Seamus Drumm in tow. Belfast is a boxing town and Drumm’s hero was Muhammad Ali. In Philadelphia McKinney had become a close friend of Angelo Dundee, Ali’s trainer. This gave us a free pass into Ali’s dressing room about a half hour before the fight. Ali was stretched out on a training table, his hands folded behind his head. He was cool and calm and talked nonstop, jumping from one subject to another. McKinney introduced Drumm as “a real revolutionary from Northern Ireland.” Small, slight, with the face of an altar boy, Drumm was not your central casting revolutionary. When he went to shake Ali’s hand, Ali did a double take, put his hands and forearms to his face, covering up.

“Don’t hurt me mister revolutionary, please don’t hurt me,” he said. “I’m too pretty.” They shook hands, a photo was taken, and Ali wished him well. We were able to hang around long enough to hear Ali’s continuing monologue. He had a question for one of his Irish security men.

“Something bothering me about Ireland,” Ali said. “Where you Irish hiding all the niggers? I have not seen one since I came here. Where you hiding them?”

“Oh no,” the security man said. “We have many black people here in Dublin. In fact most of them are Nigerians training to be doctors.

They’re probably in class or home studying.

That's why you don't see them." There was laughter all around. Ali won the fight easily, beating Lewis in a 12-round decision.

The following morning we were in a car heading north to Belfast. McKinney was driving, with Drumm up front and former light heavyweight champion Jose Torres and myself in the back seat. Soon after we crossed the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland we ran into a British Army security stop.

McKinney rolled down his window.

"Hey, any of you guys here boxing fans?"

"Yes we are," said the soldier,

"Well, in the back seat I've got Jose Torres, the former light heavyweight champion of the world. We just came from the Ali fight," McKinney said. "How would you like to meet him?"

Several soldiers gathered around the car. They were excited. Torres got out and talked with them and posed for a photo with each soldier. Everybody was happy as goodbye handshakes and backslaps ended the visit. We were waved through without a search or a dog sniff. And from the front seat, the wanted IRA gunman Seamus Drumm waved goodbye to his mortal enemies. Torres and I would learn later that the car was packed with gelignite, an explosive used by the IRA.

Even in the sunshine, Belfast was a grim city, a city now occupied by the British Army, a city of security checkpoints, of segregated communities, a city of death, a city without a future. It had a puritanical streak; swings for children in the parks were padlocked on Sundays. It was a city of stunted red brick rowhouses originally built for textile workers when Belfast's linen trade flourished. A city where discrimination against the Catholic minority, in housing, jobs, and education, was enforced by the governing Protestant majority. And it was the city where the doomed Titanic was built.

We drove directly to Seamus Drumm's

'safe house' in Ballymurphy. In the living room we were introduced to several IRA men from A Company who were lounging about drinking beer.

Among them was Jim Bryson, the officer in charge of A Company who was a legend in the IRA for his daring and his record for killing British soldiers. He had also led an amazing escape from the British prison ship, the *Maidstone*, a year earlier.

In Ed Moloney's "A Secret History of the IRA," Bryson is described as "a controlled psychopath with ice water in his blood" who would "do things no sane man would even consider."

Just like he was with the British soldiers, Torres was a big hit with the IRA men. They were amazed and delighted to have a world boxing champion among them, talking with them about boxing. To show their appreciation they invited Torres to join them for target practice in nearby Casement Park.

During the afternoon an officer from the IRA's Second Battalion—of which A Company was a part—paid a visit to the house to reprimand the men. A few weeks before, A Company members had hijacked a liquor truck so there would be refreshment at a local IRA man's wedding. "This is not how to win hearts and minds," the officer told them. "Let's not have this carry on again."

Later that evening McKinney and I dropped off Torres at a safe house in another part of the city where he would be staying during his visit. On the way back to Ballymurphy, McKinney had some news for me.

"Don't be in downtown Belfast tomorrow after 1 pm."

"Why, what's going on?," I said.

"It's going up," he said.

"What's going up?"

"The city is going up. Belfast is going up."

About an hour after the bombings, McKinney said that we'd be spending the night at the home of Frank Gogarty in the exclusive Fort

William Park community. Gogarty, a small trim man of middle age, was a dentist with a practice in the rough Protestant community called Tiger Bay. Many there referred to him as the IRA dentist. He was also chairman of the nonviolent Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) formed in the late 1960s to protest and reform discrimination against the Catholic community. But he was also a staunch IRA supporter, which led some to believe that he was diverting money raised for NICRA for humanitarian aid to the IRA to buy guns and ammunition.

When we pulled into the driveway of the Gogarty's beautiful old three-story Victorian house, an angry crowd from a nearby Protestant public housing estate was beginning to gather in the street in front of the house. They greeted McKinney and I with a shower of rocks and cries of "Fenian bastards."

"They're pissed off because of the bombings," McKinney said. "I figured that out already," I said. "Not a good way to begin the evening".

In a lounge area off the kitchen, I met Gogarty, his attractive French-born wife, their four teenage sons and several other young men. Mrs. Gogarty had been weeping. Mr. Gogarty had been drinking. Also in the room was an elderly French couple who had come to Belfast on an ecclesiastical "mission of peace." The man was a Protestant minister who a half hour earlier had been attacked and punched by the same Protestant mob that hurled rocks at us. Irony knows no bounds in Belfast.

The evening news was on and we all watched in silence. There were grim scenes of firemen and policemen shoveling up body parts after the bombings. It was becoming obvious to me that many IRA supporters, even a in this room, were appalled by the bombings and the loss of innocent lives.

As night fell, the angry crowd outside grew louder and larger. They were enraged by the

day's events. The IRA dentist would have to pay a price. And so would his guests.

McKinney took charge. The front door was reinforced with lumber and furniture. The house's huge first floor windows were taped and boarded. Mrs. Gogarty and her French peace friends were sent upstairs to the third floor.

We were armed with rakes, hatchets, pikes, shovels, and pitchforks. Around 9:30 the crowd sent up a cheer and charged the house. I was in front of a window with a pitchfork. A barrage of rocks smashed the windows but none in the mob got through them. The front door held. In the driveway a car had been overturned.

As the crowd was regrouping, McKinney asked me to try to get someone on the phone who could get the Royal Ulster Constabulary or the Army to respond. In the phone book I got the office number of the US Consul in Belfast. Miraculously, someone answered the phone and I explained that I was a journalist and an American citizen and the house I was in was under attack by a mob. I was put through to the American Consul. I explained the urgency of the situation and urged him to call the Army and the RUC and demand that they respond.

"First of all, Mr Deacy, remain calm," he said. "Secondly, I would advise that you leave the house as soon as you can."

"I can't leave the house. It's under attack by a mob of Protestants. For Christ's sake, call someone."

"Mr Deacy, unfortunately the U S Consul doesn't carry much weight here in Belfast. But I will do what I can."

The mob now had flaming torches. They charged again. Several torches landed in the house but were quickly extinguished. I told McKinney that if they had Molotov cocktails or guns or both we were dead men.

"But at least your obituary will say you died fighting for Ireland," he said.

We both laughed.

Over the next hour, the mob charged twice more. But no Molotov cocktails. No guns. Now I thought I might live. We were all very lucky.

About 11:30 the RUC arrived. We could see that an officer was talking with a few mob members. He walked slowly, hands clasped behind his back, to the front door. McKinney let the officer in.

"Here's the situation," he said. "Some of their leaders are convinced that there are guns in the house."

"If there were guns in the house we would have used them to defend ourselves," McKinney said.

"The leaders say that if two of them can join me in a quick walk through the house, then they will disperse."

After some back and forth, a deal was struck. One mob leader would do a walk-through with McKinney and the RUC officer.

When Gogarty, now in the lounge drinking, heard what was proposed he was enraged. He bounded down the hall and went for McKinney. "Don't let those bastards into my house," he roared. "They'll map every room in every part of the house. And then they'll break in and kill me and my family. Don't let the bastards in."

I was able to restrain him and get him back into the kitchen. The house tour took place, the crowd dispersed and an RUC squad was posted. McKinney, against all advice, got into his windowless car, drove to Ballymurphy, and brought Seamus Drumm and another IRA man back to Gogarty's. They each had a modern Armalite rifle and would spend the night. Just in case.

I shared a room upstairs with Seamus Drumm while the other gunman was in the downstairs lounge with McKinney and some others. A few hours later a shot rang out downstairs. Drumm was up and had his weapon, and headed downstairs to see what

was up. I waited by the stairs.

When Drumm reached the kitchen, he got the story. The other gunman had broken down his Armalite for McKinney. In putting it back together, a round discharged, missing Gogarty's son's head by just a few feet.

It had been an interesting night at Mr Gogarty's house. As the sun came up, I got my portable typewriter out and began to write about my first few days in Belfast.

The Gogartys soon moved out of the house. And a month later it was burned to the ground.

I spent another seven months in Belfast. It was to be the bloodiest year in the 30-year struggle in the North. I thought if I got close to it, I would understand it. It didn't happen.

On a rain-soaked Thursday afternoon in early 1973, I drove out of Belfast for the last time, leaving my original romantic notions about the struggle behind. I headed south for peaceful County Leitrim and to my uncle Pat Phildy McGowan and the good people of Creevelea.

On the morning of September 11, 2001 at the World Trade Center Twin Towers, the look I saw on the faces of people was the same look I had seen on the faces of people in Belfast in 1972. Absolute terror.

I did not return to Belfast until 1999. I didn't recognize the city. Someone had scrubbed Belfast clean. The British Army was gone. Gone also were Jack McKinney, Frank Gogarty, Jose Torres, Jim Bryson and so many others.

At long last peace was at hand. At long last life had trumped death.

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