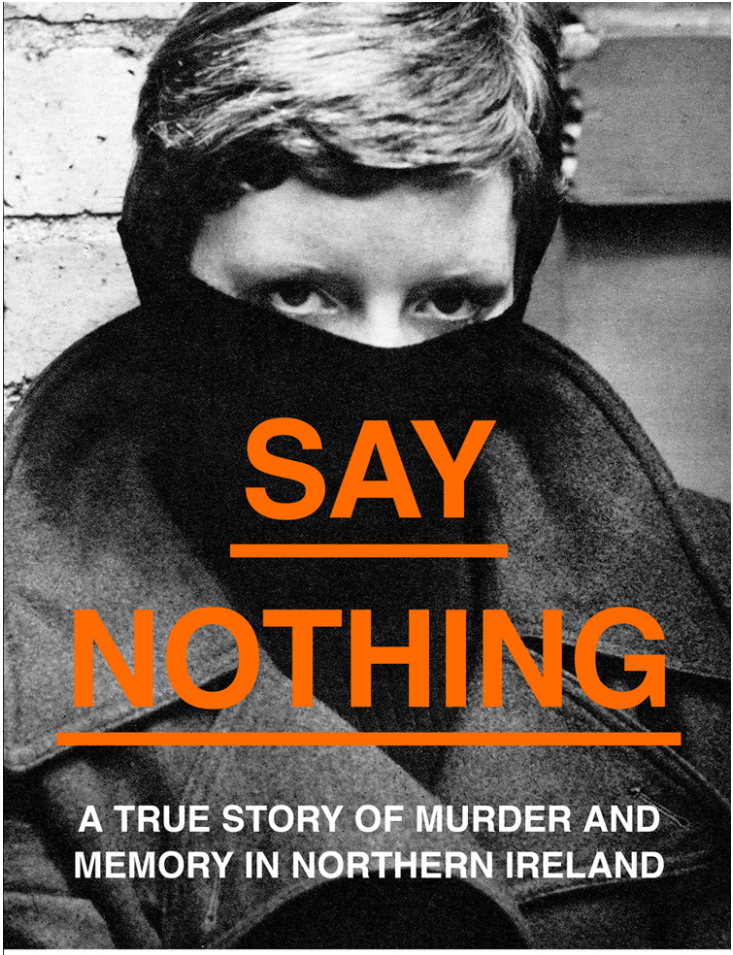


PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE

Patrick Radden Keefe

Say Nothing: A True Story Of Murder and Memory In Northern Ireland

Аннотация

‘A must read’ Gillian FlynnOne night in December 1972, Jean McConville, a mother of ten, was abducted from her home in Belfast and never seen alive again. Her disappearance would haunt her orphaned children, the perpetrators of this terrible crime and a whole society in Northern Ireland for decades.In this powerful, scrupulously reported book, Patrick Radden Keefe offers not just a forensic account of a brutal crime but a vivid portrait of the world in which it happened. The tragedy of an entire country is captured in the spellbinding narrative of a handful of characters, presented in lyrical and unforgettable detail.A poem by Seamus Heaney inspires the title: ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing’. By defying the culture of silence, Keefe illuminates how a close-knit society fractured; how people chose sides in a conflict and turned to violence; and how, when the shooting stopped, some ex-combatants came to look back in horror at the atrocities they had committed, while others continue to advocate violence even today.Say Nothing deftly weaves the stories of Jean McConville and her family with those of Dolours Price, the

first woman to join the IRA as a front-line soldier, who bombed the Old Bailey when barely out of her teens; Gerry Adams, who helped bring an end to the fighting, but denied his own IRA past; Brendan Hughes, a fearsome IRA commander who turned on Adams after the peace process and broke the IRA's code of silence; and other indelible figures. By capturing the intrigue, the drama and the profound human cost of the Troubles, the book presents a searing chronicle of the lengths that people are willing to go to in pursuit of a political ideal, and the ways in which societies mend – or don't – in the aftermath of a long and bloody conflict.

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Dedication

To Lucian and Felix

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GROSVENOR
CRUMLIN ROAD

Epigraph

‘All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.’
– VIET THANH NGUYEN
PROLOGUE

The Treasure Room

July 2013

The John J. Burns Library occupies a grand neo-Gothic building on the leafy campus of Boston College. With its stone spires and stained glass, it looks very much like a church. The Jesuits who founded the university in 1863 did so to educate the children of poor immigrants who had fled the potato famine in Ireland. As Boston College grew and flourished over the next century and a half, it maintained close ties to the old country. With 250,000 volumes and some sixteen million manuscripts, the Burns Library holds the most comprehensive collection of Irish political and cultural artefacts in the United States. One of its librarians, years ago, was sent to prison after he was caught trying to sell to Sotheby's a tract by Saint Thomas Aquinas that was printed in 1480. The library developed such a reputation for purchasing valuable antiquities that a subsequent director once had to call the FBI himself, when an Irish grave robber tried to sell him looted tombstones bearing ancient Latin crosses and intricate rings and inscriptions.

The rarest and most valuable objects in the Burns Library are kept in a special enclosure known as the Treasure Room. It is a secure space, exactingly climate-controlled and equipped with a state-of-the-art fire suppressant system. The room is monitored by surveillance cameras and can be accessed only by entering

a code on an electronic pad and turning a special key. The key must be signed out. Only a select handful of people can do so.

One summer day in 2013, two detectives strode into the Burns Library. They were not Boston detectives. In fact, they had just flown into the country from Belfast, where they worked for the Serious Crime Branch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Passing beneath colourful stained glass windows, they approached the Treasure Room.

The detectives had come to collect a series of secret files that for nearly a decade had been stored in the Treasure Room. There were MiniDiscs containing audio recordings, as well as a series of transcripts. The librarians at Boston College might have saved the detectives a trip by just sending the files to Belfast by post. But these recordings contained sensitive and dangerous secrets, and when they took possession of the material, the detectives handled it with the utmost care. The recordings were now officially evidence in a criminal proceedings. The detectives were investigating a murder.

THE CLEAR, CLEAN, SHEER THING



Child with burning cars, Divis Flats, Belfast (Jez Coulson/ Insight-Visual)

An Abduction

Jean McConville was thirty-eight when she disappeared, and she had spent nearly half her life either pregnant or recovering from childbirth. She brought fourteen children to term and lost four of them, leaving her with ten kids who ranged in age from Anne, who was twenty, to Billy and Jim, the sweet-eyed twins, who were six. To bear ten children, much less care for them, would seem like an impossible feat of endurance. But this was Belfast in 1972, where immense, unruly families were the norm, so Jean McConville wasn't looking for any prizes, and she didn't get any.

Instead, life dealt her an additional test when her husband, Arthur, died. After a gruelling illness, he was suddenly gone and she was left alone, a widow with a meagre pension but no paying job of her own and all those children to look after. Demoralised by the magnitude of her predicament, she struggled to maintain an even emotional keel. She stayed at home mostly, leaning on the older kids to wrangle the younger ones, steadying herself, as if from vertigo, with one cigarette after another. Jean reckoned with her misfortune and endeavoured to make plans for the future. But the real tragedy of the McConville clan had just begun.

The family had recently moved out of the flat where Arthur spent his final days and into a slightly larger dwelling in Divis

Flats, a dank and hulking public housing complex in West Belfast. It was a cold December and the city was engulfed in darkness by the end of the afternoon. The cooker in the new flat was not hooked up yet, so Jean sent her daughter Helen, who was fifteen, to a local takeaway for a bag of fish and chips. While the rest of the family waited for Helen, Jean drew a hot bath. When you have young children, sometimes the only place you can find a moment of privacy is behind a locked bathroom door. Jean was small and pale, with delicate features and dark hair that she wore pulled back from her face. She slipped into the water and stayed there. She had just got out of the bath, her skin flushed, when somebody knocked on the front door. It was about 7:00. The children assumed it must be Helen with their dinner.

But when they opened the door, a gang of people burst inside. It happened so abruptly that none of the McConville children could say precisely how many there were – it was roughly eight people, but it could have been ten or twelve. There were men and women. Some had balaclavas pulled across their faces; others wore nylon stockings over their heads, which twisted their features into ghoulish masks. At least one of them was carrying a gun.

As Jean emerged, pulling on her clothes, surrounded by her frightened children, one of the men said, gruffly, 'Put your coat on.' She trembled violently as the intruders tried to pull her out of the flat. 'What's happening?' she asked, her panic rising. That was when the children went berserk. Michael, who was eleven,

tried to grab his mother. Billy and Jim threw their arms around her and wailed. The gang tried to calm the children, saying that they would bring Jean back – they just needed to talk to her; she would be gone for only a few hours.

Archie, who, at sixteen, was the oldest child at home, asked if he could accompany his mother wherever she was going, and the members of the gang agreed. Jean McConville put on a tweed overcoat and a head scarf as the younger children were herded into one of the bedrooms. While they were ushering the children away, the intruders spoke to them, offering blunt assurances – and addressing them by name. A couple of the men were not wearing masks, and Michael McConville realised, to his horror, that the people taking his mother away were not strangers. They were his neighbours.

Divis Flats was a nightmare from an Escher drawing, a concrete warren of stairways, passages and overcrowded flats. The lifts were perpetually out of order, and Jean McConville was borne by the rough little scrum out of her flat, through a corridor, and down a set of stairs. Normally there were people about at night, even in the wintertime – kids kicking a ball through the hallway or labourers coming home from work. But Archie noticed that the complex seemed eerily vacant, almost as if the area had been cleared. There was nobody to flag down, no neighbour who could sound the alarm.

He kept close to his mother, shuffling along, and she clung to him, not wanting to let go. But at the bottom of the stairs,

a larger group was waiting, as many as twenty people, casually dressed and masked with balaclavas. Several of them had guns. A blue Volkswagen van sat idling at the kerb, and now suddenly one of the men wheeled on Archie, the dull glint of a pistol arcing through the darkness, and pressed the tip of the barrel into his cheek, hissing, 'Fuck off.' Archie froze. He could feel the cold metal pressing into his skin. He was desperate to protect his mother, but what could he do? He was a boy, outnumbered and unarmed. Reluctantly, he turned and ascended the stairs.

On the second level, one of the walls was perforated by a series of vertical slats, which the McConville children called 'pigeon holes'. Peering through these openings, Archie watched as his mother was bundled into the van and the van drove out of Divis and disappeared. It would later strike him that the gang never had any intention of allowing him to chaperone his mother – they were simply using him to get Jean out of the flat. He stood there in the awful, wintry silence, trying to comprehend what had just happened and what he should do now. Then he started back towards the flat. The last words that his mother had said to him were 'Watch the children until I come back.'

Albert's Daughters

When Dolours Price was a little girl, her favoured saints were martyrs. Dolours had one very Catholic aunt on her father's side who would say, 'For God and Ireland.' For the rest of the family, Ireland came first. Growing up in West Belfast in the 1950s, she dutifully went to church every day. But she noticed that her parents didn't. One day, when she was about fourteen, she announced, 'I'm not going back to Mass.'

'You have to go,' her mother, Chrissie, said.

'I don't, and I'm not going,' Dolours said.

'You have to go,' Chrissie repeated.

'Look,' Dolours said. 'I'll go out the door, I'll stand at the corner for half an hour and say to you, "I've been to Mass." But I *won't* have been to Mass.'

She was headstrong, even as a child, so that was the end of that. The Prices lived in a small, semi-detached council house on a tidy, sloping street in Andersonstown called Slievegallion Drive. Her father, Albert, was an upholsterer; he made the chairs that occupied the cramped front room. But where another clan might adorn the mantelpiece with happy photos from family holidays, the Prices displayed, with great pride, snapshots taken in prisons. Albert and Chrissie Price shared a fierce commitment to the cause of Irish republicanism: the belief that for hundreds of years the British had been an occupying force on the island

of Ireland – and that the Irish had a duty to expel them by any means necessary.

When Dolours was little, she would sit on Albert's lap and he would tell her stories about joining the Irish Republican Army when he was still a boy, in the 1930s, and about how he had gone off to England as a teenager to carry out a bombing raid. With cardboard in his shoes because he couldn't afford to patch the soles, he had dared to challenge the mighty British Empire.

A small man with wire-framed glasses and fingertips stained yellow by tobacco, Albert told violent tales about the fabled valour of long-dead patriots. Dolours had two other siblings, Damian and Clare, but she was closest to her younger sister, Marian. Before bedtime, their father liked to regale them with the story of the time he escaped from a jail in the city of Derry, along with twenty other prisoners, after digging a tunnel that led right out of the facility. One inmate played the bagpipes to cover the sound of the escape.

In confiding tones, Albert would lecture Dolours and her siblings about the safest method for mixing improvised explosives, with a wooden bowl and wooden utensils – never metal! – because 'a single spark and you were gone'. He liked to reminisce about beloved comrades whom the British had hanged, and Dolours grew up thinking that this was the most natural thing in the world: that every child had parents who had friends who'd been hanged. Her father's stories were so rousing that she shivered sometimes when she listened to them, her whole body

tingling with goose bumps.

Everyone in the family, more or less, had been to prison. Chrissie's mother, Granny Dolan, had been a member of the IRA Women's Council, the Cumann na mBan, and had once served three months in Armagh jail for attempting to relieve a police officer from the Royal Ulster Constabulary of his service weapon. Chrissie had also served in the Cumann and done a stretch in Armagh, along with three of her sisters, after they were arrested for wearing a 'banned emblem': little paper flowers of orange, white and green, known as Easter lilies.

In the Price family – as in Northern Ireland in general – people had a tendency to talk about calamities from the bygone past as though they had happened just last week. As a consequence, it could be difficult to pinpoint where the story of the ancient quarrel between Britain and Ireland first began. Really, it was hard to imagine Ireland *before* what the Prices referred to simply as 'the cause'. It almost didn't matter where you started the story: it was always there. It pre-dated the distinction between Protestant and Catholic; it was older than the Protestant Church. You could go back nearly a thousand years, in fact, to the Norman raiders of the twelfth century, who crossed the Irish Sea on ships, in search of new lands to conquer. Or to Henry VIII and the Tudor rulers of the sixteenth century, who asserted England's total subjugation of Ireland. Or to the Protestant emigrants from Scotland and the North of England who filtered into Ireland over the course of the seventeenth century and established a plantation

system in which the Gaelic-speaking natives became tenants and vassals on land that had previously been their own.

But the chapter in this saga that loomed largest in the house on Slievegallion Drive was the Easter Rising of 1916, in which a clutch of Irish revolutionaries seized the post office in Dublin and declared the establishment of a free and independent Irish Republic. Dolours grew up hearing legends about the dashing heroes of the rising, and about the sensitive poet who was one of the leaders of the rebellion, Patrick Pearse. 'In every generation, the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom,' Pearse declared on the post office steps.

Pearse was an inveterate romantic who was deeply attracted to the ideal of blood sacrifice. Even as a child, he had fantasies of pledging his life for something, and he came to believe that bloodshed was a 'cleansing' thing. Pearse praised the Christlike deaths of previous Irish martyrs and wrote, a few years before the rising, that 'the old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefield'.

He got his wish. After a brief moment of glory, the rebellion was mercilessly quashed by British authorities in Dublin, and Pearse was court-martialled and executed by a firing squad, along with fourteen of his comrades. After the Irish War of Independence led to the partition of Ireland, in 1921, the island was split in two: in the South, twenty-six counties achieved a measure of independence as the Irish Free State, while in the North, a remaining six counties continued to be ruled by Great

Britain. Like other staunch republicans, the Price family did not refer to the place where they happened to reside as 'Northern Ireland'. Instead it was 'the North of Ireland'. In the fraught local vernacular, even proper nouns could be political.

A cult of martyrdom can be a dangerous thing, and in Northern Ireland, rituals of commemoration were strictly regulated, under the Flags and Emblems Act. The fear of Irish nationalism was so pronounced that you could go to jail in the North just for displaying the tricolour flag of the Republic. As a girl, Dolours donned her best white frock for Easter Sunday, a basket full of eggs under her arm and, pinned to her chest, an Easter lily, to commemorate the botched rebellion. It was an intoxicating ritual for a child, like joining a league of secret outlaws. She learned to cover the lily with her hand when she saw a policeman coming.

She was under no illusions, however, about the personal toll that devotion to the cause could exact. Albert Price never met his first child, an older daughter who died in infancy while he was behind bars. Dolours had an aunt, Bridie, one of Chrissie's sisters, who had taken part in the struggle in her youth. On one occasion in 1938, Bridie had been helping to move a cache of explosives when it suddenly detonated. The blast shredded both of Bridie's hands to the wrist, disfiguring her face and blinding her permanently. She was twenty-seven when it happened.

Against the projections of her doctors, Aunt Bridie survived. But because she was so incapacitated, she would require care

for the rest of her life. With no hands or eyes, she couldn't change her clothes or blow her nose or do much else for herself without assistance. Bridie often stayed for stretches in the house on Slievegallion Drive. If the Price family felt pity for her, it was secondary to a sense of admiration for her willingness to offer up everything for an ideal. Bridie came home from the hospital to a tiny house with an outside toilet, no social worker, no pension – just a life of blindness. Yet she never expressed any regret for having made such a sacrifice in the name of a united Ireland.

When Dolours and Marian were little, Chrissie would send them upstairs with instructions to 'talk to your Aunt Bridie'. The woman would be stationed in a bedroom, alone in the gloom. Dolours liked to tiptoe as she ascended the stairs, but Bridie's hearing was extra sharp, so she always heard you coming. She was a chain-smoker, and from the age of eight or nine, Dolours was given the job of lighting Bridie's cigarettes, gently inserting them between her lips. Dolours hated this responsibility. She found it revolting. She would stare at her aunt, scrutinising her face more closely than you might with someone who could see you doing it, taking in the full horror of what had happened to her. Dolours was a loquacious kid, with a child's manner of blurting out whatever came into her head. Sometimes she would ask Bridie, 'Do you not wish you'd just died?'

Taking her aunt's stumpy wrists into her own small hands, Dolours stroked the waxen skin. They reminded her, she liked to say, of 'a pussycat's paws'. Bridie wore dark glasses, and Dolours

once watched a tear descend from behind the glass and creep down her withered cheek. And Dolours wondered: How can you cry if you have no eyes?

On the cold, clear morning of 1 January 1969, a band of student protesters assembled outside City Hall in Donegall Square, in the centre of Belfast. Their plan was to walk from Belfast to the walled city of Derry, some seventy miles away, a march that would take them several days. They were protesting systemic discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland. Partition had created a perverse situation in which two religious communities, which for centuries had felt a degree of tension, each came to feel like an embattled minority: Protestants, who formed a majority of the population in Northern Ireland but a minority on the island as a whole, feared being subsumed by Catholic Ireland; Catholics, who represented a majority on the island but a minority in Northern Ireland, felt that they were discriminated against in the six counties.

Northern Ireland was home to a million Protestants and half a million Catholics, and it was true that the Catholics faced extraordinary discrimination: often excluded from good jobs and housing, they were also denied the kind of political power that might enable them to better their conditions. Northern Ireland had its own devolved political system, based at Stormont, on the outskirts of Belfast. For half a century, no Catholic had ever held executive office.

Excluded from the shipbuilding industry and other attractive

professions, Catholics often simply left, emigrating to England or America or Australia, in search of work they couldn't find at home. The Catholic birth rate in Northern Ireland was approximately double the Protestant birth rate – yet during the three decades prior to the march on Derry, the Catholic population had remained virtually static, because so many people had no choice but to leave.

Perceiving, in Northern Ireland, a caste system akin to the racial discrimination in the United States, the young marchers had chosen to model themselves explicitly on the American civil rights movement. They had studied the 1965 march by Dr Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. As they trudged out of Belfast, bundled in duffel coats, daisy-chained arm in arm, they held placards that read, CIVIL RIGHTS MARCH, and sang 'We Shall Overcome'.



Dolours and Marian Price

One of the marchers was Dolours Price, who had joined the protest along with her sister Marian. At eighteen, Dolours was younger than most of the other marchers, many of whom were at university. She had grown up to be an arrestingly beautiful young woman, with dark-red hair, flashing blue-green eyes and pale lashes. Marian was a few years younger, but the sisters were inseparable. Around Andersonstown, everyone knew them as 'Albert's daughters'. They were so close, and so often

together, that they could seem like twins. They called each other 'Dotes' and 'Mar', and had grown up sharing not just a bedroom but a bed. Dolours had a big, assertive personality and a sly irreverence, and the sisters plodded through the march absorbed in a stream of lively chatter, their angular Belfast accents bevelled, slightly, by their education at St Dominic's, a rigorous Catholic high school for girls in West Belfast; their repartee punctuated by peals of laughter.

Dolours would later describe her own childhood as an 'indoctrination'. But she was always fiercely independent-minded, and she was never much good at keeping her convictions to herself. As a teenager, she had started to question some of the dogma upon which she had been raised. It was the 1960s, and the nuns at St Dominic's could do only so much to keep the cultural tides that were roiling the world at bay. Dolours liked rock 'n' roll. Like a lot of young people in Belfast, she was also inspired by Che Guevara, the photogenic Argentine revolutionary who fought alongside Fidel Castro. That Che was shot dead by the Bolivian military (his hands severed, like Aunt Bridie's, as proof of death) could only help to situate him in her menagerie of revolutionary heroes.

But even as tensions sharpened between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Dolours had come to believe that the armed struggle her parents championed might be an outdated solution, a relic of the past. Albert Price was an emphatic conversationalist, a lively talker who would wrap his arm around

your shoulder, tending his ever-present cigarette with the other hand, and regale you with history, anecdote and charm until he had brought you around to his way of seeing things. But Dolours was an unabashed debater. 'Hey, look at the IRA,' she would say to her father. 'You tried that and you lost!'

It was true that the history of the IRA was in some ways a history of failure: just as Patrick Pearse had said, every generation staged a revolt of one sort or another, but by the late 1960s, the IRA was largely dormant. Old men would still get together for weekend training camps south of the border in the Republic, doing target practice with antique guns left over from earlier campaigns. But nobody took them very seriously as a fighting force. The island was still divided. Conditions had not improved for Catholics. 'You failed,' Dolours told her father, adding, 'There *is* another way.'

Dolours had started attending meetings of a new political group, People's Democracy, in a hall on the campus of Queen's University. Like Che Guevara, and many of her fellow marchers, Dolours subscribed to some version of socialism. The whole sectarian schism between Protestants and Catholics was a poisonous distraction, she had come to believe: working-class Protestants may have enjoyed some advantages, but they, too, often struggled with unemployment. The Protestants who lived in grotty houses along Belfast's Shankill Road didn't have indoor toilets either. If only they could be made to see that life would be better in a united – and socialist – Ireland, the discord that

had dogged the two communities for centuries might finally dissipate.

One of the leaders of the march was a raffish, articulate young socialist from Derry named Eamonn McCann, whom Dolours met and became fast friends with on the walk. McCann urged his fellow protesters not to demonise the Protestant working people. 'They are not our enemies in any sense,' McCann insisted. 'They are not exploiters dressed in thirty-guinea suits. They are the dupes of the system, the victims of the landed and industrialist unionists. They are the men in overalls.' These people are actually on our side, McCann was saying. They just don't know it yet.

Ireland is a small island, less than two hundred miles across at its widest point. You can drive from one coast to the other in an afternoon. But from the moment the marchers departed Donegall Square, they had been harried by counterprotesters: Protestant 'unionists', who were ardent in their loyalty to the British crown. Their leader was a stout, jug-eared forty-four-year-old man named Ronald Bunting, a former high school maths teacher who had been an officer in the British Army and was known by his followers as the Major. Though he had once held more progressive views, Bunting fell under the sway of the ardently anti-Catholic minister Ian Paisley after Paisley tended to Bunting's dying mother. Bunting was an Orangeman, a member of the Protestant fraternal organisation that had long defined itself in opposition to the Catholic population. He and his supporters jostled and jeered the marchers, attempting to

snatch their protest banners, while raising a flag of their own – the Union Jack. At one point, a journalist asked Bunting whether it might not have been better just to leave the marchers be and ignore them.

'You can't ignore the devil, brother,' Bunting said.

Bunting may have been a bigot, but some of his anxieties were widely shared. 'The basic fear of Protestants in Northern Ireland is that they will be outbred by Roman Catholics,' Terence O'Neill, the prime minister of Britain's devolved government in Northern Ireland, said that year. Nor did it seem entirely clear, in the event that Protestants *were* eventually outnumbered in such a fashion, that London would come to their rescue. Many people on the English 'mainland' seemed only faintly aware of this restive province off the coast of Scotland; others would be happy to let Northern Ireland go. After all, Britain had been shedding colonies for decades. One English journalist writing at the time described the unionists in Northern Ireland as 'a society more British than the British about whom the British care not at all'. To 'loyalists' – as especially zealous unionists were known – this created a tendency to see oneself as the ultimate defender of a national identity that was in danger of extinction. In the words of Rudyard Kipling, in his 1912 poem 'Ulster', 'We know, when all is said,/We perish if we yield.'

But Major Bunting may have had a more personal reason to feel threatened by this march. Among the scruffy demonstrators with their hippie songs and righteous banners was his own son.

A student at Queen's with heavy sideburns, Ronnie Bunting had drifted into radical politics during the summer of 1968. He was hardly the only Protestant among the marchers. Indeed, there had been a long tradition of Protestants who believed in Irish independence; one of the heroes of Irish republicanism, Wolfe Tone, who led a violent rebellion against British rule in 1798, was a Protestant. But Ronnie was surely the only member of the march whose father was the architect of a nettlesome counterprotest, leading his own band of loyalist marchers in a campaign of harassment and bellowing anti-Catholic invective through a megaphone. 'My father's down there making a fool of himself,' Ronnie grumbled, shamefaced, to his friends. But this oedipal dynamic seemed only to sharpen the resolve of both father and son.

Like the Price sisters, Ronnie Bunting had joined People's Democracy. At one meeting, he suggested that it might be better if they did not proceed with the march to Derry, because he thought that 'something bad' was likely to happen. The police had cracked down violently on several earlier protests. Northern Ireland was not exactly a bastion of free expression. Due to fears of a Catholic uprising, a draconian law, the Special Powers Act, which dated to the era of partition, had created what amounted to a permanent state of emergency: the government could ban meetings and certain types of speech, and could search and arrest people without warrants and imprison them indefinitely without trial. The Royal Ulster Constabulary was

overwhelmingly Protestant, and it had a part-time auxiliary, known as the B-Specials, composed of armed, often vehemently anti-Catholic unionist men. One early member, summarising how the B-Specials were recruited, said, 'I need men, and the younger and wilder they are, the better.'

As the march progressed through the countryside, it kept running into Protestant villages that were unionist strongholds. Each time this occurred, a mob of local men would emerge, armed with sticks, to block the students' access, and a cordon of police officers accompanying the march would force them to detour around that particular village. Some of Major Bunting's men walked alongside the marchers, taunting them. One carried a Lambeg drum – the so-called big slapper – and its ominous thump echoed through the green hills and little villages, summoning other able-bodied counterprotesters from their homes.

If there *was* a violent clash, the students felt prepared for it. Indeed, some of them welcomed the idea. The Selma march had provoked a ferocious crackdown from the police, and it may have been the televised spectacle of that violent overreaction, as much as anything else, that sparked real change. There was a sense among the students that the most intractable injustice could be undone through peaceful protest: this was 1969, and it seemed that young people around the world were in the vanguard. Perhaps in Northern Ireland the battle lines could be redrawn so that it was no longer a conflict of Catholics against

Protestants, or republicans against loyalists, but rather the young against the old – the forces of the future against the forces of the past.

On the fourth and final day of the march, at a crossroads ten miles outside Derry, one of the protesters shouted through a megaphone, 'There's a good possibility that some stones may be thrown.' It appeared there might be trouble ahead. More young people had joined the procession over the days since it departed Belfast, and hundreds of marchers now filled the road. The man with the megaphone shouted, 'Are you prepared to accept the possibility of being hurt?'

The marchers chorused back, 'Yes!'

The night before, as the marchers slept on the floor of a hall in the village of Claudy, Major Bunting had assembled his followers in Derry, or Londonderry, as Bunting called it. Inside the Guildhall, a grand edifice of stone and stained glass on the banks of the River Foyle, hundreds of hopped-up loyalists gathered for what had been billed as a 'prayer meeting'. And there, ready to greet his flock, was Ian Paisley.

A radical figure with a rabid following, Paisley was the son of a Baptist preacher. After training at a fringe evangelical college in Wales, he had established his own hard-line church. At six foot four, Paisley was a towering figure with squinty eyes and a jumble of teeth, and he would lean over the pulpit, his hair slicked back, his jowls aquiver, and declaim against the 'monster of Romanism'. The Vatican and the Republic of Ireland were

secretly in league, engineering a sinister plot to overthrow the Northern Irish state, he argued. As Catholics steadily accrued power and numbers, they would grow into 'a tiger ready to tear her prey to pieces'.

Paisley was a Pied Piper agitator who liked to lead his followers through Catholic neighbourhoods, sparking riots wherever he went. In his basso profundo, he would expound about how Catholics were scum, how they 'breed like rabbits and multiply like vermin'. He was a flamboyantly divisive figure, a maestro of incitement. In fact, he was so unsympathetic, so naked in his bigotry, that some republicans came to feel that on balance, he might be *good* for their movement. 'Why would we kill Paisley?' Dolours Price's mother, Chrissie, had been known to say. 'He's our greatest asset.'

Though the population of Derry was predominantly Catholic, in the symbolic imagination of loyalists, the city remained a living monument to Protestant resistance. In 1689, Protestant forces loyal to William of Orange, the new king, had managed to hold the city against a siege by a Catholic army loyal to James II. In some other part of the world, an event of such faded significance might merit an informative plaque. But in Derry, the clash was commemorated every year, with marches by local Protestant organisations. Now, Paisley and Bunting suggested, the student protesters who were planning to march into Derry the following morning might as well be re-enacting the siege.

These civil rights advocates might pretend they were peaceful

protesters, Paisley told his followers, but they were nothing but 'IRA men' in disguise. He reminded them of Londonderry's role as a bulwark against papist encroachment. Did they stand ready to rise once again in defence of the city? There were cheers of 'Hallelujah!' It was Paisley's habit to whip a crowd into a violent lather and then recede from the scene before any actual stones were thrown. But as his designated adjutant, Major Bunting instructed the mob that anyone who wished to play a 'manly role' should arm themselves with 'whatever protective measures they feel to be suitable'.

In the darkness that night, in fields above the road to Derry, local men began to assemble an arsenal of stones. A local farmer, sympathetic to the cause, provided a tractor to help gather projectiles. These were not pebbles, but sizable hunks of freshly quarried rock, which were deposited in piles at strategic intervals, in preparation for an ambush.

'We said at the outset that we would march non-violently,' Eamonn McCann reminded Dolours and the other protesters on the final morning. 'Today, we will see the test of that pious declaration.' The marchers started moving again, proceeding slowly, with a growing sense of trepidation. They were massed on a narrow country lane, which was bordered on the right by a tall hedge. Up ahead was a bottleneck, where Burntollet Bridge, an old stone structure, crossed the River Faughan. Dolours and Marian and the other young protesters continued trudging towards the bridge. Then, beyond the hedges, in the fields

above, where the ground rose sharply, a lone man appeared. He was wearing a white armband and swinging his arms around theatrically in an elaborate series of hand signals, like a matador summoning some unseen bull. Soon other figures emerged, sturdy young men popping up along the ridgeline, standing there in little knots, looking down at the marchers. There were hundreds of people on the road now, hemmed in by the hedges, with nowhere to run. More and more men appeared in the fields above, those white bands tied around their arms. Then the first rocks sailed into view.

To Bernadette Devlin, a friend of Dolours who was one of the organisers of the march, it looked like a 'curtain' of projectiles. From the lanes on each side of the road, men and boys materialised, scores of them, hurling stones, bricks, milk bottles. Some of the attackers were on the high ground above the road, others behind the hedges alongside it, others still swarming around to head the marchers off at the bridge. The people at the front of the group sprinted for the bridge, while those in the rear fell back to avoid the barrage. But Dolours and Marian were stuck in the middle of the pack.

They clambered over the hedge, but the stones kept coming. And now the men started running down and physically attacking the marchers. It looked to Dolours like a scene from some Hollywood western, when the Indians charge into the prairie. A few of the attackers wore motorcycle helmets. They descended, swinging cudgels, crowbars, lead pipes and laths. Some men

had wooden planks studded with nails, and they attacked the protesters, lacerating their skin. People pulled coats over their heads for cover, stumbling, blind and confused, and grabbed one another for protection.



The ambush at Burntollet Bridge

As marchers fled into the fields, they were hurled to the ground and kicked until they lost consciousness. Someone took a spade and smacked a young girl in the head. Two newspaper photographers were beaten up and stoned. The mob seized their film and told them that if they came back, they would be killed. And there in the midst of it all was Major Bunting, the grand marshal, swinging his arms like a conductor, his coat sleeves blotted with blood. He snatched one of the banners from the protesters, and somebody set it on fire.

The marchers did not resist. They had agreed in advance to

honour their pledge of nonviolence. Dolours Price found herself surrounded by young people with gashes on their faces and blood running into their eyes. She splashed into the river, the icy water sloshing around her. In the distance, marchers were being pushed off the bridge and into the river. As Dolours struggled in the water, she locked eyes with one attacker, a man with a club, and for the rest of her life she would return to that moment, the way his eyes were glazed with hate. She looked into those eyes and saw nothing.

Finally, an officer from the Royal Ulster Constabulary waded into the river to break up the fracas. Dolours grabbed his coat and wouldn't let go. But even as this sturdy cop helped usher her to safety, a terrifying realisation was taking hold. There were dozens of RUC officers there that day, but most of them had done little to intervene. It would later be alleged that the reason the attackers wore white armbands was so that their friends in the police could distinguish them from the protesters. In fact, many of Major Bunting's men, the very men doing the beating, were members of the police auxiliary, the B-Specials.

Later, on the way to Altnagelvin Hospital, in Derry, Dolours cried, seized by a strange mixture of relief, frustration and disappointment. When she and Marian finally got back to Belfast and appeared, bruised and battered, on the doorstep of the little house on Slievegallion Drive, Chrissie Price listened to the story of her daughters' ordeal. When they had finished telling it, she had one question. 'Why did you not fight back?'

Evacuation

Jean McConville left few traces. She disappeared at a chaotic time, and the children she left behind were so young that many of them had yet to form a rich catalogue of memories. But one photograph of Jean survives, a snapshot taken in front of the family's home in East Belfast in the mid-1960s. Jean stands alongside three of her children, while her husband, Arthur, squats in the foreground. She stares at the camera, arms folded across her chest, lips pursed into a smile, eyes squinting against the sun. One detail that several of her children would recall about Jean McConville is a nappy pin – a blue safety pin, which she wore fastened to her clothes, because one child or another was always missing a button or needing some other repair. It was her defining accessory.

She was born Jean Murray, in 1934, to Thomas and May Murray, a Protestant couple in East Belfast. Belfast was a sooty, grey city of chimneys and steeples, flanked by a flat green mountain on one side and the Belfast Lough, an inlet of the North Channel, on the other. It had linen mills and tobacco factories, a deepwater harbour where ships were built, and row upon row of identical brick workers' houses. The Murrays lived on Avoniel Road, not far from the Harland & Wolff shipyard, where the *Titanic* had been built. Jean's father worked at Harland & Wolff. Every morning when she was a child, he would join the thousands

of men plodding past her house on their way to the shipyard, and every evening he would return as the procession of men plodded home in the opposite direction. When the Second World War broke out, Belfast's linen factories produced millions of uniforms and the shipyards churned out navy vessels. Then, one night in 1941, not long before Jean's seventh birthday, air raid sirens wailed as a formation of Luftwaffe bombers streaked across the waterfront, scattering parachute mines and incendiary bombs, and Harland & Wolff erupted into flame.



Jean McConville with Robert, Helen, Archie and her husband Arthur

Educating girls was not much of a priority in working-class Belfast in those days, so when Jean was fourteen, she left school and went in search of work. She ended up finding a job as a servant for a Catholic widow who lived on nearby Holywood Road. The widow's name was Mary McConville, and she had a grown son – an only child named Arthur, who served in the British Army. Arthur was twelve years older than Jean and very tall. He towered over Jean, who stood barely five feet in her shoes. He came from a long line of soldiers, and he told her stories about how he had gone off to fight the Japanese in Burma during the war.

When Jean and Arthur fell in love, the fact that they came from different sides of the religious divide did not go unnoticed by their families. Sectarian tensions were less pronounced during the 1950s than they had been in the past or would become again, but even so, 'mixed' relationships were rare. This was true not just for reasons of tribal solidarity but because Protestants and Catholics tended to live in circumscribed worlds: they resided in different neighbourhoods, attended different schools, worked different jobs, frequented different pubs. By entering Arthur's mother's house as a domestic employee, Jean had crossed these lines. When she took up with Arthur, his mother resented it. (Jean's mother may not have been delighted, either, but she accepted the marriage, though one of Jean's uncles, a member of

the Orange Order, gave her a beating for the transgression.)

The young couple eloped to England in 1952 and lived in an army barracks where Arthur was posted, but eventually they returned to Belfast and moved in with Jean's mother, in 1957. Jean's first child, Anne, suffered from a rare genetic condition that would leave her hospitalised for much of her life. Anne was soon followed by Robert, Arthur (who was known as Archie), Helen, Agnes, Michael (whom everyone called Mickey), Thomas (whom everyone called Tucker), Susan and, finally, the twins, Billy and Jim. Between Jean, her mother, her husband and her children, there were a dozen or so people crammed into the tiny house on Avoniel Road. Downstairs was a small front parlour and a kitchen at the back, with an outdoor toilet, an open fire for cooking, and a cold-water sink.

In 1964, Arthur retired from the army with a pension and set up a small building-repair business. But he struggled to stay employed. He found a new job in the Sirocco engineering works but eventually lost it when his employers discovered that he was Catholic. He held a job in a ropeworks for a time. Later, the children would recall this period – when the photo was taken – as a happy interlude. There were privations, to be sure, but nothing out of the ordinary for a working-class childhood in postwar Belfast. Their parents were alive. Their existence seemed stable. Their life was intact.

But during the 1960s, the mutual suspicion between Catholics and Protestants gradually intensified. When members of the

local Orange Order conducted their triumphal summertime marches, they would make a point of starting right outside the McConvilles' door. For years, Ian Paisley had been exhorting his Protestant brethren to seek out and expel Catholics who lived among them. 'You people of the Shankill Road, what's wrong with you?' he would bellow. 'Number 425 Shankill Road – do you know who lives there? Pope's men, that's who!' This was retail ethnic cleansing: Paisley would reel off addresses – 56 Aden Street, 38 Crimea Street, the proprietors of the local ice cream shop. They were 'Papishers', agents of Rome, and they must be driven out. There was no television in the house on Avoniel Road, but as the civil rights movement got under way and Northern Ireland became embroiled in riots, Jean and Arthur would visit a neighbour's house and watch the evening news with a growing sense of trepidation.

Michael McConville was eight when hell broke loose in 1969. Every summer in Derry, a loyalist order known as the Apprentice Boys held a march to commemorate the young Protestants who shut the city gates to bar the Catholic forces of King James in 1688. Traditionally, the marchers concluded their festivities by standing on the city's walls and hurling pennies onto the pavements and houses of the Bogside, a Catholic ghetto, below. But this year the provocation did not go unchallenged, and violent riots broke out, engulfing Derry in what would become known as the Battle of the Bogside.

As word of the clash in Derry reached Belfast, the riot

spread like an airborne virus. Gangs of Protestant youths tore through Catholic neighbourhoods, breaking windows and torching homes. Catholics fought back, throwing stones and bottles and Molotov cocktails. The RUC and the B-Specials responded to this unrest, but the brunt of their authority was felt by Catholics, who complained that the police would simply stand by while the loyalists committed crimes. Barricades sprang up around Catholic neighbourhoods as people hijacked school buses and bread vans and turned them on their sides to block off streets and create defensive fortifications. Young Catholics prised up paving stones to pile onto the barricades or to throw at police. Alarmed by this onslaught, the RUC deployed squat armoured vehicles, known as 'Pigs', which lumbered through the narrow streets, their gun turrets swivelling in all directions. Stones rained down on them as they passed. Petrol bombs broke open on their steel bonnets, blue flame spilling out like the contents of a cracked egg.

There were moments of anarchic poetry: a bulldozer that someone had left on a building site was liberated by a couple of kids, who sat atop the huge machine and drove it jauntily down a West Belfast street, to great whoops and cheers from their compatriots. At a certain point the boys lost control of their hulking steed and crashed into a telegraph pole – where somebody immediately lobbed a petrol bomb at the bulldozer and it burst into flames.

Loyalist gangs started moving systematically through Bombay

Street, Waterville Street, Kashmir Road and other Catholic enclaves, breaking windows and tossing petrol bombs inside. Hundreds of homes were gutted and destroyed, their occupants put out onto the street. As the rioting spread, ordinary families all across Belfast boarded up their doors and windows, as if for an approaching hurricane. They would move their old furniture away from the front room so there was less to burn, in the event that any incendiary material came crashing through the window. Then they would huddle in the back kitchen, grandparents clasping their rosaries, and wait for the chaos to pass.

Nearly two thousand families fled their homes in Belfast that summer, the overwhelming majority of them Catholic. Some 350,000 people lived in Belfast. Over the ensuing years, as much as 10 per cent of the population would relocate. Sometimes a mob of a hundred people would converge on a house, forcing the inhabitants to leave. On other occasions, a note would come through the letter box, instructing the owners that they had a single hour to vacate. People crammed into cars that would shuttle them across the city to safety: it was not unusual to see a family of eight squeezed into a single car. Eventually, thousands of Catholics would queue at the railway station – refugees, waiting for passage on a southbound train to the Republic.

It was not long before the mob came for the McConvilles. A gang of local men visited Arthur and told him he had to leave. He slipped out under cover of darkness and sought refuge at his mother's house. At first, Jean and the children stayed behind,

thinking the tensions might subside. But eventually they, too, were forced to flee, packing all the belongings they could into a taxi.

The city that they traversed was transformed. Lorries whizzed to and fro with whatever furniture people could gather before moving. Men staggered through the streets under the weight of ageing sofas and wardrobes. Cars burned at intersections. Firebombed school buildings smouldered. Great plumes of smoke blotted out the sky. All the traffic lights had been shattered, so, at some junctions, young civilians stood on the street, directing traffic. Sixty buses had been commandeered by Catholics and placed along streets to form barricades, a new set of physical battle lines delineating ethnic strongholds. Everywhere there was rubble and broken glass, what one poet would memorably describe as 'Belfast confetti'.

Yet, in the midst of this carnage, the hard-headed citizens of Belfast simply adapted and got on with their lives. In a momentary lull in the shooting, a front door would tentatively crack open and a Belfast housewife in horn-rimmed glasses would stick her head out to make sure the coast was clear. Then she would emerge, erect in her raincoat, a head scarf over her curlers, and walk primly through the war zone to the shops.

The taxi driver was so fearful of the chaos that he refused to take Jean McConville and her children any further than the Falls Road, so they were forced to lug their belongings the rest of the way on foot. They rejoined Arthur at his mother's house, but

Mary McConville had only one bedroom. She was half-blind, and because she had always disapproved of the former domestic employee who married her son, she and Jean did not get along. Besides, there were frequent gun battles in the area, and Jean and Arthur were concerned that a timber yard behind the house might be torched and the fire could spread. So the family moved again, to a Catholic school that had been converted into a temporary shelter. They slept in a classroom on the floor.

The housing authority in Belfast was building temporary accommodation for thousands of people who had suddenly become refugees in their own city, and eventually the McConvilles were offered a newly constructed chalet. But when they arrived to move in, they discovered that a family of squatters had beaten them there. Many displaced families were squatting wherever they could. Catholics moved into homes that had been abandoned by Protestants, and Protestants moved into homes vacated by Catholics. At a second chalet, the McConvilles encountered the same problem: another family was already living there and refused to leave. There were new chalets being built on Divis Street, and this time Arthur McConville insisted on staying with the workmen who were building it until the moment they finished construction, so that nobody else could get in first.

It was a simple structure, four rooms with an outside toilet. But it was the first time that they had a place they could legitimately call their own, and Jean, delighted, went straight out and bought material to make curtains. The family stayed in the

chalet until February 1970, when they were offered permanent accommodation in a new housing complex known as Divis Flats, which had been under construction for several years and now loomed into view, throwing the surrounding neighbourhood into shadow.

Divis Flats was meant to be a vision of the future. Built between 1966 and 1972 as part of a 'slum clearance' programme, in which an ancient neighbourhood of overcrowded nineteenth-century dwellings, known as the Pound Loney, was razed, the flats consisted of a series of twelve interconnected housing blocks, containing 850 units. Inspired by Le Corbusier, the flats were conceived as a 'city in the sky' that would alleviate housing shortages while also providing a level of amenities that would seem downright luxurious to ordinary Belfast families like the McConvilles. Residents of Divis Flats would have a shower and an indoor toilet, along with a hot-water sink. Each level of the housing block had a wide concrete balcony running from one end to the other, onto which the flats opened. This was meant to evoke the little streets outside the terraced houses of the Pound Loney – a recreational area where children could play. Each door was painted a candy hue, and the reds and blues and yellows offered a vibrant pop of optimistic colour against Belfast's many shades of grey.

The McConvilles moved into a four-bedroom maisonette in a section of the flats called Farset Walk. But any excitement they may have felt about their new accommodation soon

dissipated, because the complex had been constructed with little consideration for how people actually live. There were no social amenities in Divis Flats, no green spaces, no landscaping. Apart from two bleak football pitches and an asphalt enclosure with a couple of swing sets, there were no playgrounds – in a complex with more than a thousand children.

When Michael McConville moved in, Divis seemed to him like a maze for rats, all corridors, stairwells and ramps. The interior walls were cheap plasterboard, so you could hear every word of the dinnertime conversation of your neighbours. And because the exterior walls were built with non-porous concrete, condensation developed, and a malignant black mould began to creep up the walls and across the ceilings of the flats. For a utopian architectural project, Divis had yielded dystopian results, becoming what one writer would later describe as a 'slum in the sky'.

The same summer that the McConvilles were ousted from their home in East Belfast, the British Army had been sent to Northern Ireland in response to the Battle of the Bogside and the riots. Young, green-jacketed soldiers arrived on ships, thousands of them pouring into Belfast and Derry. Initially they were greeted warmly by Catholics, who welcomed the soldiers as if they were the Allied troops who'd liberated Paris. The Catholic population had been so furious at the RUC and the B-Specials, whom they regarded as sectarian authorities, that when the army (which appeared neutral by comparison) showed up, it seemed

to hold the promise of greater security. In West Belfast, Catholic mothers ventured up to the army's sandbagged posts and offered the soldiers cups of tea.

Michael's father was more circumspect. As a retired army man himself, Arthur McConville did not like it when the soldiers came around on patrol, speaking informally to him, as if he no longer held a place in the chain of command. At one end of the Divis complex, a twenty-storey tower had been constructed, becoming the tallest building in Belfast that wasn't a church. The first eighteen floors consisted of flats, but the British Army took over the top two for use as an observation post. As tensions mounted below, army lookouts could monitor the whole city with binoculars.

The troops had scarcely arrived before they began to lose the goodwill of the community. The young soldiers did not understand the complicated ethnic geography of Belfast. They soon came to be seen not as a neutral referee in the conflict, but rather as an occupying force – a heavily armed ally of the B-Specials and the RUC.

Catholics had started to arm themselves and to shoot at loyalist adversaries, at the police, and eventually at the army. Gun battles broke out, and a few Catholic snipers took to the rooftops by night, lying flat among the chimneys and picking off targets below. Incensed by such aggression, the army and the police would shoot back, with heavier weaponry, and the neighbourhoods echoed with the crack of M1 carbines and the

harsh clatter of Sterling sub-machine guns. Thinking that it would make them harder for the snipers to spot, the B-Specials used revolvers to shoot out the street lights, which plunged the city into darkness. British troops patrolled the empty streets in their half-ton Land Rovers with their headlights off, so as not to present a target. For all the chaos, the number of people actually killed in the Troubles was initially quite low: in 1969, only nineteen people were killed, and in 1970, only twenty-nine. But in 1971, the violence accelerated, with nearly two hundred people killed. By 1972, the figure was nearly five hundred.

With a population that was almost entirely Catholic, Divis Flats became a stronghold for armed resistance. Once the McConvilles moved into the complex, they were introduced to something that local residents called 'the chain'. When police or the army came to the front door of a particular flat in search of a weapon, someone would lean out of the back window of the flat and pass the gun to a neighbour who was leaning out of her back window in the next flat. She would pass it to a neighbour on the other side, who would pass it to someone further along, until the weapon had made its way to the far end of the building.

It was at Divis Flats that the first child to die in the Troubles lost his life. It had happened before the McConvilles moved in. One August night in 1969, two policemen were wounded by sniper fire near the complex. Prone to panic and untrained in the use of firearms in such situations, the police hosed bullets from an armoured car indiscriminately into Divis. Then, during

a pause in the shooting, they heard a voice ring out from inside the building. 'A child's been hit!'

A nine-year-old boy, Patrick Rooney, had been sheltering with his family in a back room of their flat when a round fired by the police pierced the plasterboard walls and struck him in the head. Because intermittent volleys of gunfire continued, the police refused to allow an ambulance to cross the Falls Road. So eventually a man emerged from the flats, frantically waving a white shirt. Beside him, two other men appeared, carrying the boy, with his shattered head. They managed to get Patrick Rooney to an ambulance, but he died a short time later.

Michael McConville knew that Divis was a dangerous place. Patrick Rooney had been close to his age. At night, when gun battles broke out, Arthur bellowed, 'Down on the floor!' and the children would drag their mattresses to the centre of the flat and sleep there, huddled in the middle of the room. Sometimes it felt as if they spent more nights on the floor than in their beds. Lying awake, staring at the ceiling, Michael would listen to the sound of bullets ricocheting off the concrete outside. It was a mad life. But as the anarchy persisted from one month to the next, it became the only life he knew.

One July afternoon in 1970, a company of British soldiers descended into the warren of alleys around Balkan Street, off the Falls Road, looking for a hidden stash of weapons. Searching one house, they retrieved fifteen pistols and one rifle, along with a Schmeisser sub-machine gun. But as they climbed back

onto their armoured vehicles and prepared to pull out of the neighbourhood, a crowd of locals confronted them and started throwing stones. In a panic, the driver of one of the Pigs reversed into the crowd, crushing a man, which further enraged the locals. As the conflict escalated, a second company of troops was sent in to relieve the first, and soldiers fired canisters of tear gas into the crowd.

Before long, three thousand soldiers had converged on the Lower Falls. They axed down doors, bursting into the narrow houses. They were officially searching for weapons, but they did so with the kind of disproportionately destructive force that would suggest an act of revenge. They disembowelled sofas and overturned beds. They peeled the linoleum off the floors, prising up floorboards and yanking out gas and water pipes. As darkness fell, a military helicopter hovered above the Falls Road and a voice announced over a loudspeaker, in a plummy Eton accent, that a curfew was being imposed: everyone must remain in their houses or face arrest. Using the tips of their rifles, soldiers unspooled great bales of concertina wire and dragged it across the streets, sealing off the Lower Falls. Soldiers patrolled the streets, wearing body armour and carrying riot shields, their faces blackened with charcoal. From the windows of the little homes, residents stared out at them with undisguised contempt.

It may have been the tear gas, as much as anything, that brought West Belfast together in virulent opposition. A cartridge would skitter across the pavement, trailing a billowing cloud, and

send the adolescent rock throwers scattering. Over the course of that weekend, the army fired sixteen hundred canisters of gas into the neighbourhood, and it gusted through the narrow laneways and seeped into the cracks in draughty old homes. It crept into people's eyes and throats, inducing panic. Young men bathed their faces with rags soaked in vinegar and went back out to throw more stones. One correspondent who reported on the siege described the gas as a kind of binding agent, a substance that could 'weld a crowd together in common sympathy and common hatred for the men who gassed them'.

Michael McConville made the most of this turbulent boyhood. He grew up with a healthy scepticism towards authority. The British Army was no different from the police, in his view. He watched them throwing men against the wall, kicking their legs spread-eagle. He saw soldiers pull fathers and brothers out of their homes and haul them away, to be detained without trial. Arthur McConville was unemployed. But this was hardly unusual for Divis Flats, where half the residents relied entirely on welfare assistance to support their families.

When the children left the flat in Divis, Jean would tell them not to stray too far. 'Don't wander away,' she would say. 'Stay close to home.' Technically, there was not a war going on – the authorities insisted that this was simply a civil disturbance – but it certainly felt like a war. Michael would venture out with his friends and his siblings into an alien, unpredictable landscape. Even in the worst years of the Troubles, some children seemed to

have no fear. After the shooting stopped and the fires died down, kids would scuttle outside and crawl through the skeletons of burned-out lorries, trampoline on rusted box-spring mattresses, or hide in a stray bathtub that lay abandoned amid the rubble.

Michael spent most of his time thinking about pigeons. Dating back to the nineteenth century, the pigeon had been known in Ireland as 'the poor man's racehorse'. Michael's father and his older brothers introduced him to pigeons; for as long as he could remember, the family had kept birds. Michael would set out into the combat zone, searching for roosting pigeons. When he discovered them, he would take off his jacket and cast it over them like a net, then smuggle the warm, nervous creatures back to his bedroom.

On his adventures, Michael sometimes picked his way through derelict houses. He had no idea what dangers might lurk inside – squatters, paramilitaries, or bombs, for all he knew – but he had no fear. Once, he came upon an old mill, the whole façade of which had been blown out. With a friend, Michael scaled the front, to see if any pigeons might be roosting inside. When they reached an upper floor, they suddenly found themselves staring at a team of British soldiers who had set up camp. 'Halt or we'll fire!' the soldiers shouted, training their rifles on Michael and his friend until they clambered back down to safety.

About a year after the Falls Curfew, Michael's father began to lose a great deal of weight. Eventually, Arthur grew so weak and shaky that he could no longer hold a cup of tea. When he finally

went to see a doctor for tests, it emerged that he had lung cancer. The living room became his bedroom, and Michael would hear him at night, moaning in pain. He died at home on 3 January 1972. As Michael watched his father's casket being lowered into the frigid ground, he thought to himself that things could not possibly get any worse.

An Underground Army

Dolours Price was walking through Belfast with her mother, Chrissie, one day in 1971 when they rounded a corner and saw a British Army checkpoint. Pedestrians were being questioned and searched. Chrissie slowed her pace and murmured, 'Are you carrying anything?'

'No,' Dolours said.

'*Are you carrying anything?*' Chrissie asked again, more forcefully. In the distance, Dolours could see young men being thrown up against armoured vehicles and ordered by the soldiers to take off their jackets.

'Give it to me,' Chrissie said.

Dolours produced the pistol she had been carrying and discreetly handed it to her mother, who concealed it under her own coat. When they reached the checkpoint, Dolours was forced to take off her jacket, while Chrissie, being older, was waved through. Back at the house on Slievegallion Drive, Chrissie meticulously cleaned the gun, oiling each metal component. Then she wrapped it in some socks and buried it in the garden. Later, a quartermaster from the IRA stopped by to exhume the weapon.

'Would your ma join?' he asked Dolours, only half in jest. 'She's terrific at storing weapons.'

The Falls Road and the Shankill Road run roughly parallel as

they move into the centre of Belfast, drawing closer together but never touching. The Falls Road was a stronghold for Catholics, and the Shankill for Protestants, and these two arteries were connected by a series of narrow cross streets that ran between them at right angles, and featured rows of identical terraced houses. At some point along each of these connecting streets, Catholic territory ended and Protestant territory began.

During the riots of 1969, barricades went up around the neighbourhoods, formalising the sectarian geography. These would eventually be replaced by so-called peace walls, towering barriers that separated one community from another. Paramilitaries took to policing their respective enclaves, and teenage sentries manned the border lines. When the Troubles ignited, the IRA was practically defunct. The group had engaged in a failed campaign along the border during the 1950s and early '60s, but the effort drew little support from the community. By the late sixties, some members of the IRA's leadership in Dublin had begun to question the utility of the gun in Irish politics, and to adopt a more avowedly Marxist philosophy, which advocated peaceful resistance through politics. The organisation dwindled to such a degree that when the riots broke out in the summer of 1969, there were only about a hundred IRA members in Belfast. Many of them, like Dolours's father, Albert Price, were seasoned veterans of earlier campaigns but were getting on in years.

For an army, they were also conspicuously unarmed. In a surpassingly ill-timed decision, the IRA had actually sold off

some of its remaining weapons in 1968, to the Free Wales Army. There was still some residual expertise in how to manufacture crude explosives, but the IRA had developed a reputation as an outfit whose bombers had a tendency to blow themselves up more often than their targets.

Traditionally, the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland had turned to the IRA for protection during periods of sectarian strife. But when the clashes started in 1969, the organisation could do little to stop jeering loyalists from burning Catholic families out of their homes. In the aftermath of these purges, some people began to suggest that what IRA really stood for was 'I Ran Away'.

There was a faction in Belfast that wanted to take a more aggressive stand – to rekindle the IRA's identity as an agent of violent change. In September 1969, an IRA commander named Liam McMillen held a meeting of the leadership in a room on Cyprus Street. McMillen was widely blamed for the organisation's failure to protect the community during the riots. Twenty-one armed men burst into the meeting, led by Billy McKee, a legendary IRA street fighter. Born in 1921, months after the partition of Ireland, McKee had joined the youth wing of the IRA when he was only fifteen. He had spent time behind bars in every decade since. A devout Catholic who attended Mass every day and carried a gun with him at all times, he had pale blue eyes and the conviction of a zealot. 'You are a Dublin communist and we are voting you out,' he growled at McMillen. 'You are no

longer our leader.'

One of Albert Price's old friends, the writer Brendan Behan, famously remarked that in any meeting of Irish republicans, the first item on the agenda is the split. To Dolours, a split in the IRA came to seem inevitable. By early 1970, a breakaway organisation had formed. Known as the Provisional IRA, they were explicitly geared to armed resistance. The old IRA became known as the Official IRA. On the streets of Belfast, they were often distinguished as the 'Provos' and the 'Stickies', because Officials would supposedly wear commemorative Easter lilies stuck onto their shirtfronts with adhesive, whereas the more dyed-in-the-wool Provos wore paper lilies affixed with a pin. In 1971, forty-four British soldiers were murdered by paramilitaries. But even as the two wings of the IRA intensified their battle with loyalist mobs, the RUC and the British Army, they now began to wage bloody war against each other.

Andersonstown, where Dolours Price grew up, sits above the Falls Road, at the foot of the flat-topped Black Mountain, which looms over the city in the distance. As the situation grew dire in 1969, normal life had been suspended. Children could no longer safely walk to school, so many stopped going. Two of Dolours's aunts moved to the neighbourhood after getting burned out of their homes in other areas. The army frequently raided Andersonstown, in search of IRA suspects or their weapons. One local house doubled as a bomb school: a clandestine explosives factory where Provisional IRA recruits could learn how to rig up

devices and handle incendiary material. Local residents resented incursions by the authorities, and the presence of armed and uniformed representatives of the British crown only reinforced the impression that Belfast had become an occupied city.

This dynamic of wartime siege led whole neighbourhoods to pull together and collaborate in opposition. 'The local people had suddenly changed,' Dolours Price later recalled. 'They'd become republicans.' When the authorities were coming, housewives and little children would dash out of their homes, tear the metal lids from their dustbins, kneel down on the pavement, and crash the lids, like cymbals, against the paving stones, sending up a great gnashing din that reverberated through the back alleys, alerting the rebels that a raid was under way. Scrappy school-age kids would lounge on rubble-strewn street corners and unleash a piercing finger whistle at the first sign of trouble.

It was an invigorating solidarity. As the violence intensified, grandiose funerals became routine, with rousing graveside orations and caskets draped in tricolour flags. People took to joking that there was no social life in Belfast any more, apart from wakes. These ceremonies, with their pageantry of death and nationalism, held a certain allure for Dolours Price. She had returned to school after the march at Burntollet Bridge. For years, she had aspired to go to art school, but after applying, she was bitterly disappointed to learn that she had not been accepted. Instead she secured a place at St Mary's Teacher Training College, at the foot of the Falls Road, to earn a bachelor's degree

in education.

Albert Price was an intermittent presence in these years, because he was involved in the new struggle. When the IRA needed guns, Albert went out looking for them. In the evening, Dolours would find groups of men huddled in her front room, scheming in low tones with her father. At a certain point, Albert went on the run, hiding out across the border in the Republic. Dolours started at St Mary's in 1970. She was naturally smart and inquisitive, and applied herself to her degree. But something had changed in her after the ambush at Burntollet Bridge. Both Dolours and Marian had been altered by that experience, their father would later say. After they got back to Belfast, 'they were never the same'.

One day in 1971, Dolours approached a local IRA commander and said, 'I want to join.' The formal induction took place in the front room of the Price home on Slievegallion Drive. Someone said, casually, 'Hey, come in here a minute,' and Dolours went in and raised her right hand and recited a declaration of allegiance: 'I, Dolours Price, promise that I will promote the objectives of the IRA to the best of my knowledge and ability.' She vowed to obey any and all orders issued to her by a 'superior officer'. Even as Dolours partook in this momentous rite, her mother sat in the next room, nursing a cup of tea and behaving as though she had no inkling of what was going on.

Since the moment she locked eyes with the loyalist who beat her at Burntollet Bridge, Dolours had concluded that her fantasy

of peaceful resistance had been naïve. *I'm never going to convert these people*, she thought. No amount of marching up and down the road would bring the change that Ireland needed. Having strayed, in her youth, from the bedrock convictions upon which her family had built its legacy, she would come to regard the moment when she joined the IRA as a 'return' – a sort of homecoming.

Marian joined the Provos, too. During the day, the sisters continued to attend school. But at night they would disappear, not returning to the house until late. In such situations, parents in West Belfast tended not to ask questions. Young people could vanish for a week at a time, and when they got home, nobody would enquire about where they had been. There was a reason for this. Because the IRA was a banned organisation, and even admitting to being a member was grounds for arrest, the group was fanatical about secrecy. Youths who joined the IRA tended not to tell their parents about it. In some cases, parents might disapprove: Belfast was dangerous enough already; to sign on as a paramilitary was simply tempting fate. Occasionally a young IRA gunman would go out on a sniper mission, only to round a corner and bump smack into his own mother. Unfazed by the assault rifle in his hands, she would drag him home by the ear.

But even if your parents were ardent supporters of the IRA, there were reasons not to tell them that you had joined. If the police or the army broke down the door to interrogate them, the less they knew, the better. One of Dolours's friends was a big,

square-jawed boy named Francie McGuigan. Like the Prices, the McGuigans were a staunch republican family, and because their parents were friends, Dolours and Francie had known each other all their lives. When Francie joined the IRA, he knew that his father was a member as well – yet they never discussed it. This could be comical at times, with the two of them living under the same roof. Francie's father was a quartermaster, in charge of weapons and ammunition. But when Francie needed bullets, he wouldn't ask his father; he would ask his friend Kevin instead: 'Kevin, does my father have any rounds?' Kevin would ask Francie's father, who would give the rounds to Kevin, who would give them to Francie. It may not have been the most efficient way of doing business, but it meant that certain things could be left unsaid.

The chief of staff of the Provos was a man named Seán Mac Stíofáin. A moon-faced teetotaller in his early forties, with a cockney accent and a dimple in his chin, he'd been born John Stephenson in east London, and was raised by a mother who told him stories about her Irish upbringing in Belfast. After serving in the Royal Air Force, he had learned the Irish language, married an Irish girl, adopted an Irish name, and joined the IRA. It would later emerge that Mac Stíofáin was not Irish at all: his mother, who was given to storytelling, had been born not in Belfast but in Bethnal Green, in London. But sometimes it's the myths that we believe most fervently of all. (Some of Mac Stíofáin's IRA colleagues, when they wanted to get a rise out of him, would

'forget' to use his Irish name and call him John Stephenson.)

Mac Stíofáin, though born a Protestant, was a devout Catholic who had done prison time in England for taking part in an IRA raid on an armoury in 1953. He was a 'physical force' republican, an unwavering advocate of armed struggle as the only means of ousting the British; he once summarised his personal military strategy with three words: 'escalate, escalate, escalate'. Mac Stíofáin's embrace of violence was such that he became known, to some of his contemporaries, as Mac the Knife.

In a passage in his 1975 memoir, Mac Stíofáin recalled how Dolours Price approached him. 'She was planning a teaching career,' he wrote, 'and though she came from a Republican family, she had been convinced until then that non-violent protest would succeed in overcoming the injustice in the North.' He pinpointed the ambush at Burntollet Bridge as the moment that changed her mind. Initially, Mac Stíofáin proposed that Dolours join the Cumann na mBan, the female auxiliary wing of the IRA. This was the same unit in which Chrissie Price and Aunt Bridie and Granny Dolan had all served. The women of the Cumann did serious jobs: they would care for injured men or take a gun, still piping hot from use, and spirit it away after a shooting.

But Price was offended by Mac Stíofáin's offer. Her feminism – in combination, perhaps, with a certain air of entitlement, as the scion of a notable republican family – meant that she had no intention of being relegated to a supporting role. 'I wanted to fight, not make tea or roll bandages,' she later recalled. 'Army or

nothing.' Price insisted that she was equal to any man, and she wanted to do exactly the same work that a man would do. What she wanted, she told Mac Stíofáin, was to be a 'fighting soldier'.

A special meeting of the Provisionals' Army Council was convened, and it was determined that for the first time in history, women could join the organisation as full members. This is likely to have been driven in large measure by the ambition (and unimpeachable republican lineage) of Dolours Price. But Price herself would speculate that another factor may have played a role: because men were being locked up en masse by the authorities, the Provos may have felt that they had little choice but to start admitting women.

If Price thought that being female – or coming from republican royalty, or having an education that was fancy by the standards of the IRA – might win her any breaks, she was quickly disabused of such notions. After her swearing-in, she was summoned by her commanding officer to a house in West Belfast where several IRA men had gathered. There, Price was presented with a heap of filthy, mismatched, rusty bullets that had been dug up from some arms dump God knows where. Then somebody handed her a clump of steel wool and said, *Clean the bullets*.

This, Price decided with a sniff, was the most menial job imaginable. Any adolescent lad could do it. Was this really necessary? Come to think of it, were these bullets even functional? Was anybody ever actually going to *shoot* them? She pictured the IRA men sitting in the kitchen, chortling over the

spectacle of her debasement. She was tempted to march in and say, 'You know what you can do with these bullets?' But she stopped herself. She had vowed to obey orders. All orders. This might be an initiation ritual, but it was also a test. So Price took the steel wool and started scrubbing.

'You'd spent your life being taught that this was a *glorious* way of life,' Price recalled. But if she was well acquainted with the romance of her new vocation, she was also aware of the risks. The IRA had just embarked on a shooting war with the British, and whatever her fellow recruits might say about their chances, the odds of success looked slim. In the likely event that you were outwitted or outgunned in any given operation – or in the whole campaign – you could expect the same fate as Patrick Pearse and the heroes of the Easter Rising: the British would end your life, then the Irish would tell stories about you for evermore. New recruits to the Provos were told to anticipate one of two certain outcomes: 'Either you're going to jail or you're going to die.'

Chrissie Price knew these risks, too, and for all her devotion to the cause, she worried about her daughter. 'Would you not finish your education?' she implored.

'Like the revolution's going to wait until I finish my education,' Dolours replied.

Most nights, when Dolours came home from operations, Chrissie would silently take her clothes and put them in the washer without asking any questions. But on one occasion, Dolours returned late at night to find her mother crying, because

news had reached Chrissie of a bomb going off somewhere and she had been seized by a fear that it might have killed her daughter.

Not long after the Price sisters joined the Provos, they were sent across the border to attend an IRA training camp in the Republic. These camps were a ritualised affair. Recruits would be driven in a car or minibus along winding country roads to a remote location, usually a farm, where a local guide might appear – a housewife in her apron, or a sympathetic parish priest – and escort them to a farmhouse. The camps could last from a few days to more than a week, and they involved intensive training in revolvers, rifles and explosives. The Provos were still working with a limited arsenal of antiquated weapons, many of them dating back to the Second World War, but recruits learned to oil and disassemble a rifle and how to set a charge and prime explosives. They marched in formation, just as they might have done in basic training if they were serving in a conventional army. There was even a uniform, of a sort. Day to day, the young rebels wore standard civilian garb of jeans and woolly sweaters. But during funerals, they dressed in dark suits, sunglasses and black berets, and stood in cordons along the pavements, like a resolute, disciplined street army. The authorities could take photographs at such events, and frequently did. But their intelligence on this new crop of paramilitaries was still rudimentary, and they often could not match the faces of these young recruits to names or any other identifying information.

If the image of an 'IRA man' in Belfast during the 1960s entailed a gin-blossomed barstool radical, a shambling has-been, full of tales about the old days, the Provisionals set out to upend this caricature. They aimed to be clean, disciplined, organised, ideological – and ruthless. They called themselves 'volunteers', a name that harked back to the doomed heroes of the Easter Rising and captured the sense that patriotism is a transaction in which the patriot must be prepared to pay dearly. As a volunteer, you stood ready to sacrifice everything – even your own life – in service to the cause. This pact tended to inculcate, among the revolutionaries, an intoxicating sense of camaraderie and mission, a bond that could seem indestructible.

The Price sisters may have wanted to serve as frontline soldiers, but initially they worked as couriers. This was an important job, because there was always money or munitions or volunteers to ferry from one place to another, and moving from place to place could be risky. Dolours had a friend, Hugh Feeney, who owned a car, which she would sometimes use to make runs. The bespectacled son of a pub owner, Feeney was a middle-class boy who, like Dolours, had been a member of People's Democracy and was training to be a teacher when he fell in with the IRA.

Even after becoming active volunteers, Dolours and Marian remained in college. This served as an excellent cover. They would come home after their classes, put away their books, and head out on operations. As women, the Price sisters were less

likely than their male counterparts to attract attention from the authorities. Dolours would often cross the border several times a day, flashing a fake licence that said her name was Rosie. She crossed so frequently that the soldiers manning the border checkpoints came to recognise her. They never grew suspicious, instead assuming that she must hold some dull job near the border that required her to cross back and forth. Dolours had a chatty, ingratiating, slightly flirtatious manner. People liked her. 'Rosie!' the soldiers would say when they saw her coming. 'How are you today?'

Often, the Price sisters transported incendiary material. They came to know the scent of nitrobenzene, an ingredient of improvised explosives: it smelled like marzipan. Bomb-making materials were often prepared in the Republic and then smuggled north across the border. On one occasion, Marian was driving a car packed with explosives when she spotted an army checkpoint. She was still a teenager and was driving without a licence. The explosives were concealed behind a panel in the driver's-side door. As a soldier approached to inspect the car, he reached for the door handle, and Marian realised that if he opened it, he would instantly register the weight of the hidden payload.

'I can manage!' she said, hastily opening the door herself. She stepped out and stretched her legs. Miniskirts were all the rage in Belfast, and Marian happened to be wearing one. The soldier noticed. 'I think he was more interested in looking at my legs than he was with the car,' Marian said later. The soldier waved

her through.

There were some in the more starchy and traditional Cumann na mBan to whom the presence of women in such operational roles – women who might deploy their own sexuality as a weapon – was threatening, even mildly scandalous. Some Cumann veterans referred to these frontline IRA women as 'Army girls', and insinuated that they were promiscuous. As tactics evolved in the conflict, IRA women occasionally set so-called honey traps, trolling bars in the city for unsuspecting British soldiers, then luring them into an ambush. One afternoon in 1971, three off-duty Scottish soldiers were out drinking in central Belfast when they were approached by a couple of girls who invited them to a party. The bodies of the soldiers were later discovered at the edge of a lonely road outside town. It appeared that on the way to the party, they had stopped to urinate and somebody had shot all three of them in the head. The Price sisters disdained such operations. Dolours made a point of asking that she never be assigned to a honey trap. There were laws of war, she maintained: 'Soldiers should be shot in their uniforms.'

The spectacle of women as avatars of radical violence may have felt bracingly novel, but in other parts of the world, such figures were finding a place in the iconography of revolution. While Belfast was burning in the summer of 1969, a twenty-five-year-old Palestinian terrorist named Leila Khaled hijacked a TWA flight from Rome to Tel Aviv and, with it, the attention of the world. Khaled diverted the flight to Damascus, becoming

the first woman to hijack a plane. She emerged as a kind of pin-up for the new militancy. Her photo was splashed across glossy magazines, her dark eyes and cut-glass cheekbones framed by a keffiyeh, an assault rifle clutched in her hands. A few years later, a famous photo captured the American heiress Patty Hearst brandishing a sawn-off carbine and wearing a beret. One close friend of Dolours Price's suggested that at least part of the allure for her, in those years, was 'rebel chic'.

Stories about the Price sisters began to circulate among British troops stationed in Belfast and to find their way into the accounts of visiting war correspondents. They developed an outsize reputation as deadly femmes fatales who would venture into the mean streets of Belfast with an assault rifle hidden 'down a bell-bottomed trouser leg'. Marian was said to be an expert sniper and was referred to, among British squaddies, as 'the Widowmaker'. Dolours would become known in the press as 'one of the most dangerous young women in Ulster'.

It is hard to judge how seriously to take such folklore. Some of it was the kind of frisky sexualised rumour that occasionally circulates in times of violent upheaval. A society that had always been a bit fusty and repressed was suddenly splitting apart in the most cataclysmic fashion. The perceived threats of sexual liberation and paramilitary chaos converged in the mythical spectre of a pair of leggy, rifle-toting libertines.

But if this image was to some degree a battlefield fantasy, one of the key people projecting it was Dolours Price herself. 'Would

you like to be shown round our bomb factory?' she asked a visiting reporter in 1972, adding, 'We had *Paris Match* magazine taking pictures of the place last week.' Eamonn McCann, the activist from Derry who befriended Price on the Burntollet march, would still see her from time to time. She never told him explicitly that she had joined the Provos, but McCann knew. He was dismayed. He desperately wanted revolutionary change in Ireland, but he was certain that violence was not the way to achieve it. He told his friends who joined the armed struggle, 'Nothing is going to come out of this that is commensurate with the pain that you will put into it.'

When he saw Price, McCann was always struck by her sheer glamour. Most of the republican women he had known growing up were stern and pious – if not the Virgin Mary, exactly, then the Virgin Mary with a gun. The Price sisters were something else altogether. Dolours always dressed elegantly, her hair and makeup impeccable. 'They were sassy girls,' McCann recalled. 'They weren't cold-eyed dialecticians or fanatics on the surface. There was a smile about them.' In those days there was a discount shop in Belfast called Crazy Prices, and, inevitably, Dolours and Marian became known among their friends as the Crazy Prices.



Dolours Price, photographed for the Italian magazine *L'Europeo* (© L›Europeo RCS/ph.Stefano Archetti)

Once, officers from the Royal Ulster Constabulary barged into the house on Slievegallion Drive at six in the morning and announced that they were arresting Dolours as a suspected member of an illegal organisation. 'She's not going out of

here until she's had her breakfast,' Chrissie said. The police, cowed by this small but formidable woman, agreed to wait, and Chrissie instructed her daughter to go and put on makeup. She was buying time so that Dolours could collect her wits. When Dolours was ready to go, Chrissie put on a fur coat, which she normally reserved for special occasions. 'I'm going with her,' she announced.

For a moment, Dolours was embarrassed, thinking, I'm in the IRA and my *mother* is coming with me to get arrested. But off they went. At Castlereagh police station, she was interrogated. She knew the rules, however, and she gave the police no information, repeating only 'I have nothing to say.' Eventually, she was released without charges. It would be difficult to make a case against Dolours: after all, she was still a student, with good marks and an attendance record to show for it. Before they left the station, Chrissie paused to admire the mug shot that the police had taken of her daughter.

'Can I keep that?' she deadpanned. 'That's a nice one.'

As a fund-raising initiative, the Provos took to robbing banks. *Lots* of banks. One day in the summer of 1972, three fresh-faced nuns walked into a branch of the Allied Irish Bank in Belfast just as it was about to close. The nuns reached under their habits and came out with guns – then proceeded to hold up the place. It was the Price sisters, along with another female volunteer. A month after the original robbery, three women walked into the very same bank and robbed it again. (The identity of the

thieves was never ascertained, but it was tempting to wonder whether the sisters had not returned for seconds.) On another occasion, Dolours hijacked a post office lorry, because the IRA had received intelligence that it was transporting sacks of money.

For all the horror unfolding around them, there was a sense of adventure for Dolours and her comrades, a fantasy that they were dashing outlaws in a society in which all order had broken down. When one of Dolours's close colleagues in the IRA, a man named James Brown, was taken from prison to a hospital in Antrim with a burst appendix, the Price sisters carried out an audacious rescue mission, raiding the hospital, disarming the policemen there, and springing Brown free. It was a small miracle that the sisters managed to evade apprehension by the army or the police. Perhaps their ability to play the part of demure Catholic schoolgirls whenever they were confronted was enough to divert suspicion. But the authorities were also simply overwhelmed by the level of violence during this period.

The ranks of the Provos were filled with interesting characters. Dolours became friendly with an older man named Joe Lynskey, who had grown up on Cavendish Street, off the Falls Road, and still lived with his parents and his sister as he neared his fortieth birthday. Lynskey had trained as a monk during the 1950s, at an abbey in Portglenone, taking a vow of silence and rising before dawn each morning to pray. But he ended up leaving the order and joining the IRA. Lynskey was a bit of an overgrown child, having sat out his adolescence at the

monastery. He was regarded as something of an oddball by the younger volunteers. They called him the 'Mad Monk'. But he had kind eyes and a gentle manner, and Dolours grew very fond of him.

Another person Price became associated with was a tall, angular young man named Gerry Adams. He was an ex-bartender from Ballymurphy who had worked at the Duke of York, a low-ceilinged pub in the city centre that was popular with labour leaders and journalists. Like Price, Adams came from a distinguished republican family: one of his uncles had broken out of Derry jail with her father. Adams had got his start as an activist with a local committee that protested against the construction of Divis Flats. He never attended college, but he was a fearsome debater, smart and analytical, like Dolours. He had joined the IRA a few years before she did, and he was already rising quickly through the Belfast leadership.



Gerry Adams (Kelvin Boyes/Camera Press/Redux)

Price had been loosely acquainted with Adams since childhood. When they were both kids, she used to see him riding with his family on the same buses she did, to republican commemorations at Edentubber or Bodenstown. But now he had reappeared as a firebrand. The first time she recognised him on the back of a lorry, addressing a crowd, she exclaimed, 'Who does Gerry think he is, standing up there?' Price found Adams intriguing, and faintly ridiculous. He was a 'gawky fella with big black-rimmed glasses', she would recall, and he had a

quiet, watchful charisma. Price was irrepressibly outgoing, but she found it difficult to get a conversation started with Adams. He carried himself with an aloof air of authority and referred to her, affectionately, as 'child', though he was only a couple of years older than she was. The day after Price sprang James Brown from the hospital, Adams expressed concern about her operational security. 'It said in the paper that the women were not wearing disguises,' he murmured, adding reproachfully, 'I hope that isn't true.'

Price assured him that the press account was inaccurate, because the sisters had been decked out in blonde wigs, bright lipstick and garish head scarves, 'like two whores at a hockey match'. Adams took himself pretty seriously, Price thought. But she could laugh at anyone. For security, Adams did not sleep in his own home, and would bed down instead in various billets, some of which were not homes at all, but local businesses. He had taken to sleeping, lately, at a West Belfast undertaker's. Price found that hilarious. She joked that he slept in a coffin.

'It was an exciting time,' she said later. 'I should be ashamed to admit there was fun in it.' But there was. She had only just turned twenty-one. Another family might disapprove of what Dolours and Marian were doing, but to Albert and Chrissie Price, there was a sense in which the girls were simply taking up a household tradition, and while you could blame a man for hitting someone, you could not blame him for hitting back. 'The Provo army was started by the people to set up barricades against the

loyalist hordes,' Albert explained at the time. 'We beat them with stones at first, and they had guns. Our people had to go and get guns. Wouldn't they have been right stupid people to stand there? Our people got shotguns at first and then got better weapons. And then the British, who were supposed to protect us, came in and raided our homes. What way could you fight? So you went down and you blew them up. That was the only thing left. If they hadn't interfered with us, there probably would be no Provo army today.'

When British troops were killed, Albert would freely acknowledge the humanity of each individual soldier. 'But he is in uniform,' he would point out. 'He is the enemy. And the Irish people believe that this is war.' He was against death, he insisted, but ultimately this was a question of means and ends. 'If we get a united socialist Ireland,' Albert Price concluded, 'then maybe it will all have been worth it.'

As if to underline the futility of nonviolent resistance, when Eamonn McCann and a huge mass of peaceful protesters assembled in Derry one chilly Sunday afternoon in January 1972, British paratroopers opened fire on the crowd, killing thirteen men and wounding fifteen others. The soldiers subsequently claimed that they had come under fire and that they only shot protesters who were carrying weapons. Neither of these assertions turned out to be true. Bloody Sunday, as it would forever be known, was a galvanising event for Irish republicanism. Dolours and Marian were in Dundalk when they

heard reports of the massacre. The news filled them with an overpowering anger. In February, protesters set fire to the British embassy in Dublin. In March, London suspended the hated Unionist parliament in Northern Ireland and imposed direct rule from Westminster.

That same month, Dolours Price travelled to Italy to speak in Milan and help to spread the word about oppression of Catholics in Northern Ireland. She lectured about 'the ghetto system' and the lack of civil rights. 'If my political convictions had led me to take part in murder, I would confess without hesitation,' she told an interviewer, employing the sort of deliberately evasive syntactical construction that would become typical when people described their actions in the Troubles. 'If I had been commanded to go to kill an enemy of my people I would have obeyed without the slightest fear.' In a photograph from her appearance there, Price posed like an outlaw, with a scarf pulled across her face.

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