

Corporate memory and the McGurk's Bar Massacre

Ciarán MacAirt writes about the murder of his grandmother and 14 other civilians in a Belfast bar 43 years ago, and the families' on-going campaign for truth

From that moment the bomb exploded, our campaign for truth began.

For as our family members lay buried amid broken brick and beam, the British state and its information agencies cranked into gear and began burying the truth along with them.

Pro-state loyalists, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), had attacked the family-run bar that cold night, three weeks before Christmas of 1971. A young paper boy witnessed a man get out of a car, plant the bomb in the doorway and light its fuse. He watched this man scurrying back to the car which then sped off down the road. The paper boy saw a local turn the corner to go into the pub but, as the man testified to the Coroner's Inquest, he shouted a warning, 'Mister, don't go into that bar, there's a bomb there!'. He did not need to be told twice but turned on his heel and hurried away.

He was 40 yards from the bar when the bomb ripped through the building and brought the roof down upon the people underneath. The pub owner, Patrick McGurk, lost his wife, his only daughter and his brother-in-law in the attack, never mind his livelihood, and all of his belongings in the family home above the bar. The Keenan children lost both their mother and father. Edward and Sarah Keenan were having a drink and a laugh with my grandmother and grandfather when the bomb exploded. My grandfather, John Irvine, was buried but survived whilst his wife, Kathleen, my

grandmother, was burned alive beside him. All around them people fought for life. Many lost that last fight.

In all, 15 innocent civilians – men, women and children – were massacred, and more than another dozen were lucky to escape with their lives in what then was the single greatest loss of civilian life in any attack in the United Kingdom since the Nazi blitz a generation before.

Our families' grief is no different than the torment of any other family who has lost a loved one during the recent conflict. No different.

What compounded the grief of our families, though, is that the British state and its security forces conspired to blame our family members for the explosion by creating the pretext that the bomb belonged to one of them. Under the control of the Information Research Department, the state's information agencies in the police, the army, intelligence

service and government synchronised and told the world that it was a republican bomb-in-transit. They painted a picture that the customers were either guilty by association or they were being schooled in bomb-making.

They did this not only without any evidence whatsoever, but also

in spite of evidence including, of course, first hand witness testimony.

The police ignored forensic and pathology reports. They disregarded lines of inquiry which pointed the finger of blame at loyalists (including an admission of guilt by the perpetrators). We now know that they found and finger-printed the car used in the explosion (Police Ombudsman, 2011) as it was abandoned a few hundred yards away. The car and following documents disappeared, though. We now also know that the police did not question suspects named by their own agents about the bombing even when they had them in custody for questioning for other crimes. The police today can neither confirm nor deny that the bomb gang itself – as the families have long suspected – contained at least one state agent.

What they now call police error or 'missed opportunity' was bad enough but the police actually tried to frame two local Catholic men for the mass murder without any evidence and without even questioning them about it. In fact, when I traced the endless lies told about our families through British archives whilst researching my book (MacAirt, 2012), I found that the genesis of all of the disinformation lay in a police document created just hours after the bombing, and before

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my grandmother and a few of the other victims had even been identified. A Royal Ulster Constabulary Duty Officer's Report written for press release recorded:

'At 8.45 pm on Saturday, 4th December, 1971,

an explosion occurred at McGurk's Licensed Premises... Just before the explosion a man entered the licensed premises and left down a suitcase, presumably to be picked up by a known member of the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army). The bomb was intended for use on other premises. Before the 'pick-up' [their

emphasis] was made, the bomb exploded’.

So the very people who should have been defending the basic human rights of innocent citizens sought instead to criminalise them, and for a long time they succeeded.

Our families’ only crime was their faith.

The policy at that time (and for some time after) was to ignore loyalist, or protestant extremist, violence completely. Roman Catholics alone were being interned without trial whilst there existed, quite simply, a discriminatory ‘Arrest Policy for Protestants’. This is the actual name of the British document and you can read it for yourself as part of the historic archives on our campaign website.

I was able to prove in 2009, nearly 38 years after the bomb, that the authorities rightly knew that the bar had been attacked and that it was not an accidental explosion. The General Officer Commanding in charge of the British Army in the north of Ireland at this time received a report from an Ammunition Technical Officer (ATO) who was an expert in bomb explosion patterning and who

was at the scene in its aftermath:

‘A bomb believed to have been planted outside the pub was estimated by the ATO to be between 30/50 lbs of HE [High Explosive]’.

The RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) never interviewed this ATO or recorded this report anywhere in its investigation. It would not have suited the lie that the police created around the same time.

Then again was this ever designed to be a fair and just investigation? We will test in court whether the state met its obligations under Article 2 of the European Convention of Human

Rights in this investigation and in the two Police Ombudsman reports and four Historical Enquiries Team reports.

Worryingly, the former Chief Constable of our so-called reformed Police Service of

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Northern Ireland refuted the central finding of the Police Ombudsman who concluded in February 2011 that the RUC was guilty of ‘investigative bias’ at least. By contesting the statutory body set up to hold the police to account, the Chief Constable created what leading human rights lawyer, Niall

Murphy, called ‘a constitutional crisis’ during a public discussion at Féile an Phobail on 5 August 2013.

Our relationship with the police has suffered even further since the release of this report. We had to seek a judicial review to gain access to the latest report into the murder of our loved ones by the Chief Constable’s Historical Enquiries Team.

The truth recovery mechanisms offered by the state have failed us and this is why I have

had to devote so much of my adult life to recovering evidence buried in state archives. We have been forced to initiate potential civil proceedings against the state for the lies it created about our loved ones and its failed investigations. This is working its way slowly through the legal system whilst our family members dare to hope for a modicum of truth and justice so many years later.

Ours has been a constitutional campaign fought with great dignity for 43 years now but so well we know the intransigence we must face still. This was no better exemplified when some of the families met with the former Chief Constable to tackle him on his refutation of the Police Ombudsman’s report in 2011. Some may have considered it rather ham-fisted as he wheeled into the meeting with many of his top police officers in train. One of the older family members asked him during the meeting how many of his team were former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and each and every one looked to the ground. ‘Well Chief Constable’, he said, ‘I have a serious concern that you are seeking counsel from people who are suffering from corporate memory of their time in the RUC’ (MacAirt, 2012). Let there be no doubt. None of us can trust police investigating other police no matter where we live. ■

Ciarán MacAirt is an Irish author and family campaigner. He also manages a social enterprise called Paper Trail which offers legacy archive research to human rights lawyers, and free support to families affected by the conflict who are searching for the truth in official files

References

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Photograph courtesy of Ciarán MacAirt