

Moving On - Part 1

Six years living away from Northern Ireland, I decided to come home, to Ireland. To live on the island of my birth. Reconnect. To touch places and communities familiar and unfamiliar. Derry was a good place to start when I was offered a job there in 1978.

During my time as a volunteer in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, living on local wages, I had hoped to make a small contribution to a country on the verge of independence; I carried the notion that perhaps I could do the same on my return. It came as a surprise that a group in the City had fundraised for my project in the distant Western Pacific. Meeting them was my first contact with Derry.



A detail from Bishop's Gate on Derry's Walls (Wikipedia)

The City was in effect in the middle of a war. The Troubles. Deaths had peaked in the early years of the decade, yet in the late seventies, there were still around one hundred fatalities each year. The widespread relief across all communities at the signing of the Good Friday Agreement was twenty years away.

I lived on the west bank of the City, mostly Catholic and broadly republican. I enjoyed the music and social scene. Dated girlfriends. Met friends in bars. The place was alive with political debate. Among my friends, there was a sense that change was always possible. Actually inevitable. That it would get better for everyone.

A few things came as a shock. I'd never seen a city get its foreheads darkened with ash, on Ash Wednesday. Never. I'd never stood for The Soldier's Song. Beside young men upright to attention. The a.m. disco beat just faded, the room bristling. Never.

I settled in and went about my work as best I could. It was a new project that sought to improve understanding and action around issues of global inequality and poverty. I worked in schools and with community groups. Catholic schools were generally more sympathetic to reducing inequality. Protestant ones often suspicious of action for change. It was a challenge.

There were high levels of poverty across the City. The Catholic population seethed with resentment against past and present discrimination. I knew this but had never really come face to face with it. The gerrymandering of housing allocation had stopped. The City Council had begun to reflect a more democratic voice. Though I didn't need to look far to see that sectarianism was alive and kicking. The new Ulster University had been sited in green fields outside Coleraine rather than at

the obvious location at Magee College in Derry. A decision cloaked in secrecy. The understandable anger initially shocked me.

Suspicious abounded in the security-conscious City. Who was who? A Ballymena prod wandering in and out of the Bogside Community Association, where I was generously offered admin support, must have raised an eyebrow, a question asked. I had my list of trusted friends and community contacts at the ready, though it was never needed.

I had the good luck to have an office in 45 Clarendon Street; a Victorian red-bricked terrace. The building housed four or five community projects, no one knew for sure how many. In my spare time that first year, I delivered a local magazine, Community Mirror; getting to know the geography of the City's communities. The sweep of the river, its hills and tight old streets. Discovering elevated viewpoints where the visitors looked in awe. The last walled City built in Europe. Walls again used for defence.

The small office on the first floor had a beautiful large oak desk. It had been used previously by Paddy Doherty - Paddy 'Bogside' as he was known. Often, sticking his head around the door to enquire how I was settling in, he would point to the desk, 'My desk,' he would remind me, 'I'll want it back,' he said in a tone of parental authority, one Paddy was noted for.

Derry took on a facade of normality. Yet gaping holes in city centre streets and the numerous screened security locations with tall camera towers told another story.

You quickly became blind to much of this. To the visitor the place looked grim. A night-time bomb would send a hollow boom across the river leaving an eerie silence, a heartbeat stalled. Then at the next dawn you woke with the City, got up and got on with it.

The music scene was alive with rock and punk bands. The Undertones got Teenage Kicks and The Casba rocked. The Casba Bar that is; its floor and tables swayed as we pogo-danced, bunched in the small bar just outside the City's walls.

People I was acquainted with were killed by one group or another, others lost loved ones in Bloody Sunday's carnage, others damaged by the overarching violence and trauma. It's a terrible picture, its detail sharpening with time.

Some years earlier at the height of the Troubles, while living at home in Ballymena, I jumped at the chance of escaping the bloody insides of a small chicken factory to drive a regular delivery run to Belfast. Dropping off boxes of chickens all across the city. Winding through street barricades and checkpoints, past burnt-out cars, changing routes around 'ongoing incidents'. The old Transit liable to backfire, potentially lethal if it happened in the wrong place. I don't ever recall mentioning any of this back home. These were regular working days.

Travelling with a friend one Friday night on our way from Derry to Ballymena, we were stopped at an army checkpoint a few miles north of the town. On the dark roadside, we answered their questions, but on the request for our date of birth, we tried the 'I'm-not-legally-obliged-to-give-you-that' answer. A term that was

legally correct, if uncooperative. As the minutes past the repeated questioning took on an edge. I was pushed back against the car and told, with a rifle on my chest and the soldier's breath on my face, that he could spend all f***** night at this game. Our choice. They weren't going anywhere. We gave them our dates of birth and went our way. Chastened. Raised in an entirely Protestant community I had no experience of this type of policing with its edge or threat, though it was common for many on a daily basis. And this was relatively mild.

A year after arriving in Derry I met Berenice in Dublin. Two years later, on a journey that took us over a pot-holed road to a 'mixed' marriage, we were looking for somewhere to live in Donegal. Not Derry. Across the border in Donegal.

Concludes in Part 2

A note here on my use of Derry as opposed to Londonderry or L/Derry. Growing up in Unionist Ballymena in the 1960's I recall it always being referred to as Derry. Whether in conversation or referring to the Apprentice Boys of Derry, or the Derry Feis where my father had sung as a child. Later political agencies started to use the more formal Londonderry to further the case of the City's Unionist and Protestant roots and allegiances. I don't recall this use in our family. So, I've stuck to what I'm most familiar with.