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## 'On this day the IRA' Twitter author tells of solitary quest to remember forgotten dead

*Bimpe Archer*

8-10 minutes

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As the Twitter account acting as a daily roll call of IRA murder victims scales back its activity, the author tells Bimpe Archer why he launched a one-person crusade to remind the world of their names and faces.

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"A SINGLE death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic."

It is a quotation ascribed to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, but five decades after the first of more than 3,600 deaths in the Troubles, it inspired one man to embark on a solitary mission to share stories of Northern Ireland's forgotten dead.

Determinedly anonymous, his focus is exclusively on the victims of Provisional IRA violence and uses the thoroughly modern medium of Twitter for the roll call of the dead.

The origin story of @OnThisDayPIRA is as curious as the unique slice of social media the account occupies, sparked not so much by a Twitter storm, but by the debate which followed.

"There was a piece on (BBC Radio Ulster's) Talkback one day where they were talking about the Barry McElduff incident when he put the loaf of bread on his head," its author told The Irish News.

The Sinn Féin MP had tweeted a video of himself in a shop with a loaf of Kingsmill bread on his head, asking where the bread was

kept on the 42nd anniversary of the Kingsmill massacre.

Unionists had accused him of mocking the deaths of 10 Protestant civilians murdered by republicans, despite apologising and deleting the video, which he denied was an allusion to the massacre, the party suspended him for three months and he later resigned his seat, but has since returned to frontline politics as a councillor.

"One of the journalists was talking about how significant it was that (fellow party member) John O'Dowd had said people at Kingsmill were murdered.

"I thought it was quite bizarre that somebody would find it a significant confession to say that. It got me thinking about the issue of language, the use of language, saying 'so and so was murdered'."

The English graduate began to look into the way Trouble's era deaths were spoken and written about and discerned a disparity in the way killings were described.

"The word murder just wasn't used for IRA killings. It was constantly avoided.

"I think in Northern Ireland there is an attempt to re-write the past. I didn't think it particularly at the start, but as time has gone on I can see it.

"I was born in the early 1980s and a lot of things are history to me, but as I looked at some of the things that happened, you see a pattern in relation to the IRA campaign. There are things I had forgotten about or didn't know about - like the vast majority of security forces people were murdered while off-duty, that there was a campaign against contractors who worked for the security services.

"So many (of the dead) are anonymous. If you look at the whole of the campaign it was like so many people died it becomes a statistic, their immediate family dies off, the people that remember them."

That thought led him to the infamous Stalin quote and ignited a

determination to help those individual emerge from the shadows of the bitter conflict and the fractious peace which has followed.

The daily tweets from @OnThisDayPIRA began on January 16 2018, with the author working late into the night to curate each entry.

He chose Twitter because it is "seen as quite a republican platform in some ways, not somewhere you often see the republican narrative challenged".

"Could we balance the discussion if we could force people to face up to the reality of what took place and do it very factually. I have tried to do it dispassionately."

He insists he is a political, noting wryly, "certain politicians tend to suddenly start retweeting from the account around election times".

When asked his name, he gives the pseudonym Winston Smith, protagonist of George Orwell's dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four.

In the 1949 book, Smith rewrites old newspaper reports in order to create a government approved record of events for the Ministry of Truth and remove 'unpersons' who have fallen out of favour with the totalitarian regime from photographs.

He cites as his inspiration the hero's discovery of a newspaper report disproving the official state version of the past and opening his eyes to the corrupt society and its notorious 'doublethink'.

His research has taken him from seminal Troubles chronology Lost Lives to newspaper microfiche archives, and books by former British soldier Ken Wharton among others.

Determined to have an image to place with each post, a breakthrough came when someone pointed him in the direction of the CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet) website which has information and source material on 'the Troubles' and Northern Ireland politics from 1968 to the present.

It has an unrivalled collection of images of the dead, which has

allowed the account to put a face to so many of the forgotten victims of past violence.

But over the past two years he has found out that no resource is infallible.

"There was a soldier I tweeted about who was murdered in Divis Flats and I had followed a News Letter report from the time and someone challenged me last year and said that's not accurate, it was put out to besmirch people in the area.

"It had initially been said that a gang of women cornered him in an alleyway before a gunman arrived and shot him dead. They said it was women in the area who raised the alarm with the army to let them know they had left one of their men behind.

"I went back to look and a few days later in the newspaper there was a statement saying that which has been accepted by the authorities.

"On one occasion I had the wrong photograph. I thought it was a soldier because it appeared with his account in CAIN, but someone got in touch to say, 'No that's my mate' - it was an ex-RUC man."

The second year of the project has been about correcting errors both major and minor and adding extra details as families share never seen before photographs.

As the project has gained traction - the majority of page impressions from outside Northern Ireland - it has become less of a lonely station for the author.

"Generally families are very, very supportive and will give me photographs of relative and that will be the first time they have been seen outside the family.

"The point at which I realised how important it could potentially be to people was the day I found a photograph of somebody who had never seen a picture of their dad, Roderick Bannon.

"He was murdered in south Amagh in 1976 and I was contacted on Twitter one day by his son asking 'Do you have any details on

Roderick Bannon' and we put up a video I had found on YouTube as part of a video about the history of the regiment and his dad's case was part of that little bit.

"A copy on the News Letter microfilm on their front page was a photograph of his dad. It was the first time he had seen a photograph. I was then contacted by an officer in the regiment who had his passing out photograph to pass on to his son."

However, having reached two million impressions a week, @OnThisDayPIRA is scaling back its activity, with no more daily posts - although relatives and friends can request their loved on be featured on the anniversary of their deaths.

Inevitably, retreading daily the horrors which one human can do to another has taken its toll.

"It's something I did in the evening and I remember in the early days discovering the next day was the anniversary of La Mon at about 11 o'clock at night. I sat up mabye to half one/two o'clock preparing a thread on La Mon. I did not know the details of that, how charred the bodied were, they could only be identified by dental records.

"I remember waking up that night in tears, for no reason but what I as looking at earlier."

He is affected even now as he recounts a particularly harrowing recent post where he reported a letter left by murdered UDR soldier Roger Love to be opened in event of his death which included the line "I know I will be forgotten about".

His voice choked with emotion, he reads from the open 1972 letter from 18-year-old Stephen Keating's mother to his killer: "Sniper do you know what you have done? Stephen wasn't a Catholic or a Protestant but a Christian guarding a Catholic area".

Two years after the project began, he now knows that "someone was murdered by the IRA on nearly every day of the year. There is only Christmas Day and one or two others that no one died".