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Opinion

Viewpoint: Justice can stand the test of time

Monday, February 04, 2008

William McDermott will not be the last person to be publicly accused of a murder that stirs painful memories in Northern Ireland. The violent criminal, currently serving a four-month prison sentence in England, is said by his ex-wife to have confessed to murdering his 10-year-old brother Brian in 1973.

The killing stands out across three-and-a-half decades because of the victim's age, the fact that it has remained unsolved, and the dreadful brutality of the attack. Brian McDermott's scorched torso and severed arm were recovered from the River Lagan after searchers spent a week looking for the missing boy.

The general reaction to the alleged confession is natural and right. There have been indications the PSNI will review the case, and so they should. Every evidential opportunity should be examined again.

Brian's other surviving brother, Eddie, told this newspaper at the weekend that William McDermott should take a lie detector test.

If this man is guilty, there is no sense that his responsibility has diminished simply because of the passage of time.

The strength of that desire for justice, a generation after the killing, should give us pause for thought.

Two hundred and sixty-three other people were murdered the year Brian McDermott was killed. This was a time of incessant violence, of gun battles in the streets, bombings, and sectarian kidnappings that had only one awful outcome.

Many died in circumstances instantly brought to mind by those who lived through that stage of the Troubles.

Others are forgotten to the wider public, remembered only by devoted circles of their loved ones.

Yet their deaths, and thousands like them, are usually considered in a different light because, collectively, there is a political element to them. Even now, as Northern Ireland gropes closer to normality, there are arguments that political stability requires a line to be drawn across the past.

At present the Consultative Group on the Past led by Lord Eames and Denis Bradley is wrestling with the question of what to do with future William McDermotts: people accused of getting away with murder.

If new evidence is discovered, or old evidence suddenly comes to light, many will react as we have to the McDermott case. Others will argue that in order to heal society, some pains must be ignored.

There is no easy answer; there may not even be a right one.

But the response that Brian McDermott's death has evoked, the instant and understandable hunger for justice, should remind us of the scale of what may be asked of the individual families of the dead. And the scale of the task before us all.

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