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# Omagh: A name blackened with infamy

Friday, 15 August 2008

For a decade now, Omagh has been a name known around the world. In distant places, people who have little notion of any other place in Northern Ireland can still recall the town. They may have never heard of Tyrone, may only have the vaguest ideas of Ireland, north and south, but they remember there was a place where one shattering August afternoon our divisions reached a shocking and terrible climax.

Infamy is Omagh's burden,

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placed on the little town on the Strule by the men who built and abandoned a massive car bomb in its heart. Men who presumably still walk among us, who are perhaps — we can but hope — haunted by what they did, but who nonetheless begin each day drawing the breath they denied to 31 other human beings.

What are these?

The attention that returned to Omagh this week in the run-up to today's anniversary has been at best uncomfortable and at worst unwelcome. It has exposed division, bitterness, and wounds still raw. For many, the grief has never lessened and probably

never will. The fact that there will be two separate memorial services this weekend is evidence of how hard healing can be. That disagreement has been unfortunate, but perhaps inevitable in circumstances that are so difficult and have to accommodate so many points of view. It is right, at least, that the church leaders, after some thought, will bridge the two by attending both.

But the return to Omagh has also shown us a place that has refused, whatever the rest of the world thinks, to be defined solely by what happened there. While individual bitterness towards the bombers is

evident and understandable, it is remarkable that Omagh has not been engulfed by sectarianism. That could so easily have been the legacy of Omagh, but there is evidence that, if anything, the two communities have pulled closer together. Protestant and Catholic churches have endorsed a plan to educate the town's children on one site, the old Lisanelly Army barracks. The barracks became the temporary morgue where Omagh's dead were brought that terrible day.

There is even a nugget of that comfort in the divide over this weekend's services. The differences there are not defined by religion.

In one sense, this weekend's services may be a further sign that the Troubles are gone. Other anniversaries come around with the calendar and should continue to be marked, but this may be the last time an atrocity is marked on this scale and with this much scrutiny.

There we have a divergence of which we must be acutely aware. Northern Ireland's wider society is moving on, and not all those directly affected can. For them, the Troubles do not fade with time.

Omagh's anniversary also brings a reminder that we should not be complacent. PSNI Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde reminded us this week that the dissidents who bombed Omagh are still out there, still plotting to kill. So far they have been thwarted.

Their persistence is dismaying because we have moved so far from that darkest day ten years ago. That is the last lesson of Omagh: we should grieve, guard against any repetition, and always embrace what we have.



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