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Disappeared still haunt the IRA

By Brian Rowan
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Their ghosts hang round the neck of the IRA.

In its own way that organisation will justify the killings — the “executions” — but it cannot defend the practice that opened out the story of the “disappeared”.

It is a chapter from the past that still reads into the present — stories of killing, of secret burial, of hidden and lost graves of tortured, traumatised families and it is an episode that still haunts the IRA itself.

It is something in the war that just won't go away — something described as “a dark and disturbing period for many republicans”.

You do not hear the word “shame” — but disappearing bodies is something I have heard described as falling outside the IRA's own “moral framework”, what it would consider as the rights and wrongs of war.

Republicans don't want to talk about it. Others use it to remind everyone of the IRA's ugly past.

But for those, such as the McIlhone family, who have waited so long for some news, for information that might lead to the discovery of the remains of a loved one — there is no need for such reminders. For many years grieving families have lived in the reality of this horror.

I have written in this newspaper about a meeting with ‘Peter’ in March 1999 — the IRA's P O'Neill of that period — the man who spoke its words and read its statements. He dictated a statement and briefing on the ‘Disappeared’, and I wrote it down.

The statement was about nine killings, nine secret graves and nine people, whose names were read out one

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by one — Seamus Wright, Kevin McKee, Eamon Molloy, Jean McConville, Columba McVeigh, Brendan Megraw, John McClory, Brian McKinney and Danny McIlhone.

And with each name a reason for the “execution” was offered — Jean McConville “admitted being a British Army informer”, Columba McVeigh “admitted being a British Army agent directed to infiltrate the IRA”, Danny McIlhone “admitted stealing weapons from an Oglai gh na hEireann dump and using the weapons in armed robberies”.

It was all matter-of-fact — as cold as the secret graves, in which the disappeared were silenced, no longer able to speak their side of the story.

The IRA has not apologised for these killings — its regret is the disappearing of the bodies.

“This issue has caused incalculable pain and distress to a number of families over a period of many years,” the IRA said in March 1999.

“In initiating this investigation our intention has been to do all within our power to rectify an injustice, for which we accept full responsibility, and to alleviate the suffering of the families,” the statement continued.

“We are sorry that this has taken so long to resolve and for the prolonged anguish caused to the families,” read the statement.

Some IRA claims were disputed .

In July 2006 the Police Ombudsman made a statement on one of the cases of the Disappeared saying there was no evidence that Jean McConville “gave information to the police, the military or the Security Service. She was not an informant”.

But, within 24 hours, the IRA responded — in another meeting with another P O'Neill and in another statement read to me.

An IRA “investigation” had confirmed that Jean McConville “was working as an informer”.

The story of the Disappeared is not over. There are bodies still to be found, and until all are returned, that war of decades and that war of words will not end.



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