



Johann Hari: Sixties radicals are back. But why?

Search for the victims of IRA's cruellest crime

The Provos killed Danny McIlhone, then for 27 years refused to admit it. Only now is his family's long wait for the truth at an end

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Of all the heartless things the IRA did, shooting people, burying them in unmarked graves and then denying all knowledge so their families could never know what happened to them must rank among the most cruel of all.

The IRA did so in at least nine cases. Now the partial remains of what is believed to be the fifth of the nine victims – described as "the Disappeared" – has been found in Co Wicklow, south of Dublin.

The body is thought to be that of Danny McIlhone, a west Belfast man who disappeared in 1981. His family did not report him missing, hoping that he was still alive and would return to them. The remains will be formally identified through DNA testing.

The discovery was made along a track leading to an abandoned farmhouse after days of activity involving two mechanical diggers, trained dogs, and police and other experts.

It has been a long wait for the McIlhone family. When the discovery was announced this week, the family appealed for privacy, adding: "We hope and pray for good news."

In such cases "good news" means the missing can at last be given decent burials.

In 1998, the IRA admitted it had carried out a number of killings in the Seventies and Eighties, bringing to an end the many years of painful suspense for the families. Many hoped their relatives would return, although as the years passed such hopes faded. The absence of a body hindered the grieving process.

In 1999, almost two decades after Mr McIlhone vanished, the IRA admitted he had been shot in 1981, after a struggle while he was being questioned about stealing IRA weapons, and secretly buried on a remote hillside. Republicans passed on information to the authorities about the burial site, but the 11 weeks of searches that followed proved fruitless.

Such unsuccessful searches bring fresh trauma for families. In the case of Jean McConville, who was missing for many years, two large-scale searches produced nothing. Her body was eventually found four years after the first search.

Her son Archie said: "The searches were nerve-racking. When they were called off, it just wrecked you. I was gutted, really gutted."

The remains of Margaret McKinney's son Brian were eventually found. Mrs McKinney, of Belfast, said: "It's not easy to watch those big mechanical diggers. It's quite harrowing. I believe the IRA is telling the truth and has given the proper information, but they can't locate the exact spot because so many years have passed."

The plight of such families has been among the most painful and poignant spectacle of the Troubles.

Their ordeal goes into a new phase as they await the outcome of the searches. These are macabre affairs. Soil is carefully removed, set aside and sifted. Some of the operations last for months before they are called off.

The Wicklow find was welcomed by Gerry Adams, the Sinn Fein president, who said: "The apparent discovery of Danny McIlhone's remains will come as a great relief for his family. "It is also evidence that Republicans continue to work diligently on this important issue. It will be an encouragement to the other families who still hope that the remains of their loved ones will be found." Although the IRA and Sinn Fein originally resorted to blank denials in the saga of the Disappeared, they were eventually worn down by a campaign which attracted support from leading figures Tony Blair and Bill Clinton.

The IRA admitted it had secretly killed and buried "a small number of people," saying it had set up a special unit to trace the bodies. The organisation claimed it was attempting to alleviate the "incalculable pain and anguish" caused to the victims' families.

The searches are under the auspices of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains which operates in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

This is part of a special arrangement made after Republicans let it be known that some of those who carried out the killings had since died. Others had since left the IRA or were reluctant to give information.

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