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## Victims deserve the truth of real justice

**Tom Kelly**

By Tom Kelly

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IT was my birthday yesterday but I did not feel like celebrating. Don't worry, age is not dimming my inner party animal. Over the weekend the people of Omagh marked the 10th anniversary of the tragedy that was the omagh bombing.

Watching the surviving victims and the families of those who lost loved ones was heart-rending.

Some people say they knew where they were when John F Kennedy was shot or when men landed on the moon or when Princess Diana died. I don't.

I do remember where I was when the Omagh bomb went off. I was in Rome celebrating my birthday two days early.

Sitting in a bar watching the pictures of the carnage being transmitted on Italian television was surreal. Only two hours earlier over a 'relaxed' lunch we were extolling the virtues of a peaceful Northern Ireland to our guests.

Some peace it was for the people of Omagh on August 15 1998. Those who planted the bomb intended to wreck the fledgling peace process – after all they were well schooled in the model tactics of militant republicanism that had previously wreaked havoc in La Mon, Enniskillen and the Abercorn bar.

But Omagh unwittingly became a symbol of hope and not despair despite the devastation caused by a bomb that left 29 people – including a mother and her unborn twins – dead and more than 300 injured.

Ten years on many of those injured have moved on too as they try to rebuild shattered lives.

The controversy over the wording on the memorial is regrettable but it is also understandable.

For some, the loss has left an indelible scar, an emptiness – an emptiness fuelled by a failure of the justice system to apprehend those responsible for the bombing.

In an attempt to move on and in some ways validate our new political dispensation, so many victims and their families in Northern Ireland are being asked to make a second sacrifice for the sake of peace.

They are being asked to keep their grief private. They are being asked to settle for less justice than they are entitled to.

Of course, new institutions like the Police Ombudsman's Office, the Historical Enquiries Team and the gaggle of victims' commissioners all seek to provide outlets for the voices of victims but being heard is not the same as being served.

Truth and justice in a democracy are not supposed to be mutually exclusive but in Northern Ireland victims are being asked to settle for one in lieu of the other.

During our bad old days, nationalist representatives were fond of quoting Spinoza to securocratic British governments, saying that if they continued to pursue policies that sacrificed justice in the interests of security they would stand to lose both.

Surely in peacetime if our political representatives continue to pursue policies that sacrifice justice in the interests of expediency we stand to lose truth too.

That has to be the fear of the Omagh relatives and other victims' groups.

The harrowing images of Omagh being replayed on our screens last week demonstrate how much we have to lose if the process collapses again.

During the week I sought out a poem by John Montague, who was raised in

Co Tyrone. It's called There are Days.

Looking at the anguish on the faces of the relatives and victims 10 years on, it spoke to me and somehow seemed appropriate.

There are days when

one should be able

to pluck off one's head

like a dented or worn

helmet, straight from

the nape and collarbone

(those crackling branches!)

and place it firmly down

in the bed of a flowing stream.

Clear, clean, chill currents

coursing and spuming through

the sour and stale compartments

of the brain, dimmed eardrums,

bleared eye sockets, filmed tongue.

And then set it back again

well tamped down, of course,

the laved skin and mouth,

the marble of the eyes

rinsed and ready

for love; for prophecy?

No doubt there are days when the Omagh victims and their relatives feel they would like to “pluck off their heads” and wash out the memories of that tragedy.

No doubt they would like to have “clear, clean currents” spuming through the “sour and stale compartments of the brain”.

No doubt they would like to be “rinsed and ready” to meet their loved ones again or to turn the clock back to 3pm on August 15 1998.

Unfortunately they can't but their prophecy must be a future based on both truth and justice.

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