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Victims of collusion seek truth over prosecutions

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Clara Reilly is leading a delegation from the group to the US, where the quilt will be exhibited at Boston Public Library.

The Relatives for Justice group is seeking acknowledgment of the facts surrounding collusion-related deaths in the North, and is travelling to the US to highlight its campaign, writes

Bryan Coll

HANGING ON the wall of the Relatives for Justice office, the Remembering Quilt looks like a colourful, yet unremarkable piece of craftwork, the kind seen in countless classrooms and community centres across the country.

Only on closer examination does the extent of the suffering told by each of the nine-inch squares of material become apparent. The nine quilts stitched by republican families (and some loyalists) commemorate over 400 victims of the Troubles, the majority of whom were killed by the police or the British army.

One of the group's members used part of her wedding dress to design a memorial square to her father, who was murdered only days before her wedding.

Another quilt shows a photograph of teenager Brian Stewart, who was killed by a plastic bullet fired by a British soldier in 1976. Part of his mother's square on the Remembering Quilt shows a birthday cake bearing 13 candles. An additional, solitary candle lying next to the cake commemorates Brian's burial on his 14th birthday.

"This has been real therapy at work," says Clara Reilly, whose brother, an IRA member, was shot dead by loyalist paramilitaries in 1981, in a suspected case of collusion.

"Some of the families hadn't spoken about what happened to them for 30 years," she says. "When they came here to work on the quilt, they broke down in tears."

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Reilly is leading a delegation from the justice group to the US this week, to present the quilts to the Boston Public Library, where they will be exhibited for the month of July.

For Reilly, the faces that peer down from the quilts are those of the forgotten victims of the Troubles.

"People killed by the state don't get the same parity of esteem as British soldiers, policemen and the military people," she says. "We have a battle on our hands to raise their profile."

Reilly is keen to stress that the Falls Road-based justice group has also campaigned on behalf of Protestant victims of collusion, such as 18-year-old David McLwaine, who was killed by the UVF in 2000.

McLwaine, who had no paramilitary connections, is thought to have been mistaken for an LVF member in a reprisal attack his family believes may have been sanctioned by the security forces. "We will not have a hierarchy of victims," says Clara Reilly. "If the family of the man who killed my brother came to put a square on this quilt, they would have as much right to do it as I have. It's a difficult step to take, but everyone who has lost a loved one has a right to remember them."

In the justice group's attic offices, its deputy director Andrea Murphy's desk is littered with brochures highlighting collusion-related deaths. One recounts the details of a spate of killings in 1971, which the group describes as the Ballymurphy Internment Massacre. A total of 11 people are believed to have been killed by the Parachute Regiment over a three-day period, as the British army carried out early-morning arrests in the Springfield Park area of west Belfast.

Among the dead were a priest, Fr Hugh Mullan and Joan Connolly, a mother of eight.

An independent truth commission, Murphy argues, may allow the truth about lesser-known atrocities from the Troubles, like the deaths in Ballymurphy, to emerge. But, given the 36 years that have passed since the events, some argue that such a body would only serve to raise community expectations to unrealistic levels.

"Our families aren't interested in prosecutions," says Murphy. "What they want is full acknowledgement of the facts. There is a generation that has never had any space to express their hurt and pain. We need to give them something now."

Otherwise, Murphy believes, there is a risk of renewed conflict in the North. "When people aren't seeing developments on the ground, who can say what the children of those killed are going to do?"

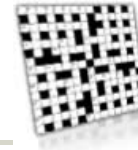
In their joint declaration last month, Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, co-chairs of the Consultative Group on the Past, stated: "We cannot ignore that . . . the state sometimes acted illegally. Deep in their hearts, unionists knew that some accusations of collusion were not unfounded." Given the thorniness of collusion, particularly the reluctance of some unionists to admit that it existed, many see the issue as a potential stumbling block for the consultative group, which is due to publish its final recommendations in the autumn.

"There are many different narratives about this conflict," Denis Bradley told *The Irish Times*. "At the moment, there is fighting around victimhood, what a victim means and what was legitimate. We have to move to a position where there is a greater possibility of some kind of reconciliation and forgiveness."

After packing away the memorial quilts to send to Boston, Clara Reilly echoes Denis Bradley's words, but hesitates around forgiveness.

"We're not looking for a witch hunt here," she says. "It's about collective responsibility. We need to be taking small steps at this stage."

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