

INTRODUCTION

'See how these Christians love one another'

Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus, AD 160-230

IF THERE is any truth in the theory advanced by a small minority of American psychologists that the minds of babies can be influenced before birth by what goes on in the outside world, my involvement in civil rights matters must have received a very early push. Shortly after my parents were married, and I was on the way, they rented Cohannon House near Dungannon as their first home. Until then the house always had Protestant tenants, so the local Orangemen assembled at the gates to beat their enormous drums in protest. My parents were forced to leave and find a quiet, mainly nationalist, area at Warrenpoint, Co. Down in which to live.

In the same way, when she was a girl, iron must have entered the soul of a certain Patricia McShane, living on the main street of a notably 'black' town, Portadown, where her father owned a drapery shop.

Over the years the house came in for a lot of Protestant attention, drumming, plate glass window smashing and general intimidation. It became so bad during the July marching season that the young McShane family, year after year, had to be sent away for safety.

Eventually we two were married and ended up in a general medical practice in Dungannon.

When Brian Gregory prevailed upon me to put a book about civil rights in Northern Ireland between covers, I warned him that it would be 'a warts and all' production. Nevertheless,

should anyone feel cross with me about what I have said about them they might console themselves with the knowledge that I have been applying the old journalist's adage throughout the whole volume, 'when in doubt, leave out'.

It angers me greatly when I think of all the terrible things that have happened since the mid-sixties. The various Unionist Governments and their masters at Westminster allowed things to go so far that the reputation of our beautiful little country has been sullied in the eyes of the world. They delayed reform so long that odious violence came to the surface—violence which is part of the make-up of us all, but hopefully lies buried in our unconscious minds. For many young men it surfaced and led to ruined lives. The first intimation I had that things might go from bad to worse was after we had presented our case, and there was time for it to sink in. Gerry Fitt, on an Independent Television programme, using charts and statistics on a blackboard, clashed with Mr Roy Bradford, MP, reputed to be a moderate Unionist. The discussion was about the Derry voting gerrymander. Mr Bradford argued with seeming conviction that there was nothing wrong with the voting situation in Derry.

I am afraid that some, perhaps most, Protestants who might read this book will label me a bigot. I must counter by claiming that I have only presented what I believed the situation to be. I would welcome it if some Protestant apologist for Unionist policy were to produce a reply, backed up, of course, with documentation and statistics.

I hasten to add that, being born and bred in Northern Ireland, I have always loved the place and, what is more, being a Christian, I must love everyone in it (Catholics are Christians too!). The only people I would exclude from this sentiment are those who indulge in violence, or support it.

When I say that I loved everyone in Northern Ireland this especially applied to my Protestant patients. How I appreciated these intelligent, direct and reliable people, and how I admired their Nonconformist conscience that made them such pleasant contacts. I appreciated their sterling worth in staying with me against what I am sure were considerable pressures.

I have always felt hurt when the impression surfaces, as it

does from time to time, that many Protestants, deep down, regard us Catholics as non-persons. They do not consider us as individuals but are content to discount us all equally. Here are some examples of what I mean:

1. Many Protestants continue to assert that all people interested in civil rights are republicans. This is quite untrue, as the reasonably well-informed among them must know.

2. The dismissive attitude to Father Denis Faul disturbs me. I know him well. He is a very special person. What sets him apart is his desire to serve 'the least brethren'. His concern for Caitlín ní h-Ullacháin is a very secondary one. I remember once asking him in the early days why he involved himself so deeply. It was during the time of Internment. 'If you could see', he said, 'the sheer misery of the mothers going in the station wagons to see their imprisoned relatives, and their unhappy children, you would understand.'

3. Some years ago, after he resigned, Patricia and I travelled down alone in a lift at a hotel in London's Knightsbridge with Captain Terence O'Neill. He did not show even the slightest sign of recognition of two people who should surely have given him many times 'furiously to think'.

4. When Lord Grey was to open a new wing at South Tyrone Hospital I demonstrated with a group against religious discrimination in employment at the hospital. After the Governor had passed in, I handed my placard to someone else and went in after him as a local general practitioner to attend the opening. I was told afterwards that two burly Protestants had been positioned behind me in order to lift me to my feet if I did not rise for the Anthem. That the Dungannon people should not have the sense to know that my kind of Catholic would never dream of offering a discourtesy to the Queen is disturbing.

This book could never have begun but for the work of my secretary in Dungannon, Rita McQuaid, née Corrigan. Her filing, duplicating and general secretarial work was indispensable and of a very high standard. My appreciation goes also to Kathleen McGovern who deciphered my dreadful handwriting and typed from my longhand. Thanks also to my daughter Darine Gleeson who read the proofs.

May I end with an appeal. Firstly to my Protestant fellow countrymen: have a titter of wit and realise that you will never get the genie back into the bottle; and to nationalists: I beg them to undertake the slower but more hopeful approach of bridge-building—try to achieve every day the unity of feeling we only experience when Ireland plays England in Rugby football at Lansdowne Road or when Irish boxers meet foreign opponents—there is no other way.

Conn McCluskey
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