The Red Hands of Ulster

Philip Metres

"It's not a problem, is it?" my colleague Dianna said to Raymond, our Belfast coordinator, on friendly terms with nearly everyone on all sides of the former conflict. Raymond had frozen at the news that Dianna promised that our group of faculty and students would stop by and visit David. It was 2017, over twenty years after the signing of the peace, but the past was still very much alive to Raymond, a lifelong resident of Belfast who'd lived through the Troubles. On the sidewalk of the busy Newtownards Road, Raymond's eyes darted back and forth as if performing advanced calculus in his head, trying to find a way through this predicament. I could see the red rising around his neck.

"Okay, okay, it's just across the street," Raymond said. "You can't say no, really," he said, to himself as much as to us.

What Raymond meant was he didn't feel comfortable saying no to a man alleged to have associations with the Red Hand Commando (hereafter referred to as RHC), who may have killed him during the Troubles just for being a Catholic.

So we left the grand, glassy, openness of Skainos—a community center where we'd met peacebuilders and community workers—and headed across the road to a stolid, non-descript storefront that housed REACH (Renewing. Engaging. Advancing Community Hopes), an organization formed by former members of the RHC. David stood waiting outside, wearing a blue plaid shirt and blue jeans with stylish dress shoes. He was tall and straight-backed, fit, and his head was shaven. His features were angular, almost raptor-like. His handshake did not crush with the exaggerated masculinism of some American men, but was the firm grasp of someone

confident but warm.

"You're very welcome," he said, his reading glasses perched above his head glinting in the light, smiling at us, his cheeks dimpling.

Before ushering us inside REACH, David took us around the corner to look at a local Loyalist mural around the corner. One sign splashed in red what it called "the terrorist crimes of the IRA." The list of civilian dead—and the language on the mural—was stark. There's no denying the facts, even as garishly displayed as this one: the IRA killed a lot of people who had nothing to do with the conflict.

"I just wanted to show you all one way the community sees the past," David said, pausing a moment.

"We sanitize a lot of what went on," he said, "and I probably will be guilty of the same." He gestured toward the blown-up photographic images of bodies pulled from the rubble of an IRA bombing.

"Because to tell the truth is horrific to hear," he went on, "and it's horrific to listen to what you're saying to yourself. You refuse to be honest with yourself, so I'll try to be honest whatdoyoucallit but at the same time I know my own mind changes and warps things to make it easier for me to handle it."

Whatdoyoucallit peppers David's speech, a linguistic placeholder as he works through what precisely he wanted to share. *Whatdoyoucallit* made me think of the problem of this place—how everything, even the names of places, are contested here, and whatever we call something or someone is not as clear as we'd like to think it is. People in this neighborhood will call this part of the world Northern Ireland, but just down the road they'll call it the North of Ireland. The term "The Troubles" was an elegant way of describing the period of conflict between those who

saw themselves involved in an armed struggle to free Ireland and those who saw themselves trying to save a state that guaranteed their place in the United Kingdom. Even the peace agreement that ended it has many names: The Good Friday Agreement, the Belfast Agreement. Some have joked: we can't even agree on what to call the agreement.

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David is not his real name. Membership in the Red Hand Commando, an illegal ("proscribed") organization in the United Kingdom since 1973 for its history of terrorism, can lead to a maximum of fourteen years in prison. Even wearing clothing, or publishing an image of a flag or logo, that bears the insignia of the Red Hand Commando could lead to six months in prison. In 2017, members of the RHC applied to have it removed from the list of proscribed organizations, but the application was rejected.

Politicians from across this still-divided community seemed unanimous in keeping the RHC on the list. A far-left Sinn Fein politician, Gerry Kelly averred, saying "victims would find that abhorrent." Jim Allistair, of the Traditional Unionist Voice, asked "why would they want to remain associated with a terrorist organization that murdered people?"

David doesn't see it that way. For him, the RHC has been one of the only paramilitary organizations to have stayed steadfast in their support of the peace agreement. Unlike many other paramilitary organizations whose members have occasionally become engaged in criminal activities and armed violence, including the UVF and dissident IRA, the RHC has held to its promise to end the war.

Despite the political consensus and the legal proscription arrayed against the RHC, David still wanted to speak to us. His struggle to find the right words and his refreshing honesty alleviated my fears about meeting him. I would come to know him as a reflective, remorseful

searcher, an autodidact who has kept trying to understand both the world and himself.

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On a corkboard inside REACH, a yellowed clipping from a 2015 *Belfast Telegraph* read: "Film world's rare focus on loyalism often hazy." Aaron Edwards argues that complex representations of loyalists in film have been sorely lacking. He quotes academic Conal Parr as saying this absence is due to the fact "because they [loyalist voices] are lost in the deluge of ridicule and mockery that too often passes for informed comment."

Having taught representations of the Troubles for many years now, I can say it's absolutely correct. Only the film *Five Minutes of Heaven* comes even close to having a sympathetic loyalist character, and he's joined the Ulster Volunteer Force and murdered a Catholic civilian in cold blood. Based on the real-life story of Alistair Little, *Five Minutes of Heaven* does more to show the psychology of the loyalist community than just about any popular representation that I've seen, as well as what it's like to look back on what resulted. Early on, Little, now an older man looking back, recalls to his interlocutor. "For me to talk about the man I have become," he says, "you need to know about the man I was." He recalls

> there were riots on the streets every week; petrol bombs every day, and that was just in our town. When you got home and switched on the TV, you could see what was happening in every other town as well, and it was like we were under siege. Fathers and brothers and friends were being killed in the streets, and the feeling was, we all have to do somethin'. We're all in this together and we all have to do somethin'.

That feeling of being under siege may be the key to understanding loyalism—it's the prism of

fear through which those of the Protestant Unionist Loyalist community have viewed Ireland, perhaps for centuries. It helps that Liam Neeson, an Irish film icon and all-around hunk, plays Little as a well-dressed, articulate, and lonely person whose remorse for his crime drives him to work for peace throughout the world.

But the article haunts me doubly, because I realize again how unsympathetic I have found the loyalist narrative in general. Wrapping themselves in British flags, sometimes literally, loyalists hold onto a version of Britishness that most English would find stale and strange. At their worst, they can echo the same arguments of Americans in the South still salty about the Civil War and angered by the purported rise in fortunes of Black people.

Part of the problem also has been, unfortunately, in loyalism itself. Gary Mitchell, a working-class playwright from a loyalist background, described it this way in an interview: "Protestants don't write plays, you see. You must be a Catholic or a Catholic sympathizer, or a homosexual to do that. No one in our community does that because playwriting is a silly pretend thing." The sarcasm dripping from his voice comes with more than a tincture of hurt. After a run of one play, Mitchell was threatened out of his home in a loyalist estate in 2005. It's hard for me to understand a community that doesn't care for arts—at least beyond its own kind of art in blood-and-thunder bands, street murals, and the great and terrifying Eleventh Night bonfires celebrating the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over the Catholic King James in 1690.

I, too, have played the lazy game of oversimplifying complex identities here in Northern Ireland, of "perpetuating negative stereotypes of loyalists and reduce their whole demeanour to angry, flag-waving Neanderthals who cling onto an outmoded view of the world." After working through my own Irish Republicanism, fed on Famine and rage at the British Empire, I worked to

create a more dispassionate story of what I always thought of as "the other side." The way I teach it to my students is that, in the Venn diagram of Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist identity, the loyalist tends to be working class, is loyal to the Crown yet suspicious of the British government, and is willing by any means necessary to maintain the union.

David looked over at me as he saw me reading the article, nodding.

"The image of loyalism is of a shaven-headed, tattooed thug," he said, pausing. "Just because I have tattoos and my head is shaved doesn't mean anything," he said, laughing at his own joke, imagining how we might be seeing him.

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From the archive:

Thirty-two-year-old James Carson, a Catholic civilian, was working at his shop on Donegall Road, in the Falls area of West Belfast, on August 10, 1991. That morning, gunmen entered the store and shot Carson, splattering his brains on the wall. His business partner and friend, Dermot Kennedy, said that the police disrespected the family, and left the body lying in the shop for seven hours, violating Carson's desire to donate his organs. Even worse, Kennedy recalled, "On the evening news, footage showed James being bundled out in a body bag with his face visible, further adding to the trauma of his family." At the time, Carson's mother said, "I would not like any mother to experience what has come to me. No one deserves this." No one was ever arrested for the crime.

Carson was likely targeted for selling a republican newsletter *An Phoblacht*—but anyone in the Falls could have been a target, given that it was a Catholic enclave.

Thirty years after the killing, family and friends of Carson gathered to commemorate him publicly and to ask for truth and justice in the unsolved murder case. They remembered Carson

as someone who was beloved by everyone in the community, who loved to talk to everyone, even when the line to the register stretched outside their 7-Eleven. Their shop, though, was not affiliated to the American corporation "7-Eleven." Attorneys for the conglomerate had, in fact, written a cease-and-desist letter because of the use of their name and logo. Carson, delighted, had framed the letter and hung it in the store, and invited their attorneys in London to come and take down the sign themselves.

As a young man, he was known as a rebel. While all the boys had hair down to their shoulders, Carson had hair down to his waist. He played bass guitar, and loved Thin Lizzy. But his love for music spanned far beyond rock. "None of us heard of Tchaikovsky or Beethoven until we met James," Kennedy recalled. "All of the people of Arizona Street knew the *1812 Overture* back to front. The neighbors used to call, when he returned from work, to just play it once."

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Fussing with the computer, trying to bring up a slide show, David grew frustrated. Beneath his reading spectacles, his eyes are deeply blue. There is something delicate about him, the way he pauses, his *whatdoyoucallits*.

"Old age is a wonderful thing," he said, looking up from the screen momentarily to apologize. "Each day is a fresh day. You've forgotten the previous day." The pause between his sentences showed a stand-up comedian's sense of timing.

He's in his sixties, but it makes me think about the odd hope there is in forgetting, something that people have had a hard time doing here.

At last, after further fussing, the slide show was ready. David turned to us again, looking at us, and then slightly above the line of our gaze.

"Forgive me if I go quiet," he said. "Because believe it or not, every time I do this, it retraumatizes. It brings back things."

Like so many other former combatants, David's war is not over. We might not see it on the streets, but for many people in this country—and countries all over the world—people still live with the trauma of violence—witnessed, experienced, and perpetrated. It comes back to him, particularly when he has to revisit the rooms of the past, and find the words to light up those spaces, to face their dark corners. But he doesn't look away.

"Sometimes it affects me, sometimes it doesn't. It all depends how depressed I am about the world on a given day. If I do go quiet, it's just probably because I need to gather myself again to go on."

It was as if he'd taken off some invisible armor, and now was showing us his battle scars.

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From the archive:

On April 17, 1991, it's alleged that the Red Hand Commando shot dead John Joseph Gerard O'Hara. A resident of the Short Strand, a Catholic enclave in East Belfast, O'Hara was working that night as a temporary taxi driver for a Catholic taxi firm. Around 10:15 pm, he got a call and headed for a pickup in South Belfast. The call was made to draw him to Dunluce Avenue. There, looking for his pickup, two masked gunmen appeared from out of the dark, firing into the vehicle, fatally wounding O'Hara.

He was forty-one. He left behind a wife and five children.

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David was born in 1957 to a working-class family living in condemned housing. His parents did menial work. His dad's wages, he reports, was 4 pounds a week in 1970. Three boys and a

girl slept in the same bedroom, and the boys shared a single bed.

"That was no different than somebody in the Catholic area as well," he said. "The working class was no different."

He still remembers the night in 1969, age eleven, when first heard the sound of gunfire. It turned out to be a gun battle between the police and the police irregulars, known as the B-specials. In other words, it was a fight between people on the same side of the nationalist divide—a foretaste of the intracommunity feuds that would impact both the loyalist and republican communities. The next year, after the David family went to Bangor on vacation, they never returned to their old house, moving to another community, further inside East Belfast, farther from the interface where Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods became flashpoints for violence. They trying to keep their children away from the trouble that metastasized into the Troubles.

"It didn't work," he reported with a rueful laugh. "I rioted because it was fun—the buzz that you get fighting against the establishment! It was exciting for a teenage boy to be doing that—destructive, but as a teenager, you don't think things through." He was a boot boy in the Tartan gangs, recruiting pools for paramilitary organizations named after the Scottish tartan that so many loyalists claim as their own. In other words, he was just like Alistair Little.

And just like Little and other teenage boys of their generation, the energy of conflict drew him. It was electrifying. It was dangerous. It was, alongside drinking and chasing girls, how you could become a man. When there wasn't rioting in their area, they organized their own. "We picked teams," David said, grinning. He wasn't sectarian for political or ideological reasons. In fact, "There was no political thought in my head." He just loved to fight.

He wasn't the only one in his family impacted by the Troubles. His oldest brother married a

Roman Catholic woman, which could have been a deadly decision in this proudly Protestant enclave. But no one in the family, living in a divided society, knew that she came from the Catholic community.

One day, when the television news covered IRA bombing, David grew enraged. “I ranted at the TV until flecks of spit came out of my mouth. I, like many others, blamed the [Catholic] religion and the people. It was a very angry period. I was an angry young man. Four or five months down the line, my brother asked me would I go to Twinbrook with him, which was a nationalist estate.”

As they made their way to Twinbrook, a public housing estate that he’d never set foot inside because it was a nationalist enclave, it finally dawned on him that his brother’s wife was a Catholic.

“It’s hard to imagine the shame I felt, the pain and hurt I’d been causing her,” he said, the pain passing over his face like a shadow. “But it also was another learning thing for me. It shaped another part of the path that I was on. My parents were not bigoted. I can’t use that excuse.”

Two of his brothers would both get into deep trouble, joining loyalist paramilitaries. “One ended up being sentenced for ten years, for possession of arms,” he said, listing off the fates of his brothers. “One ended up being arrested for robbing a shop, to get a TV that could be sold to raise money to give to the prisoners.” In 1976, David joined the British army and served twelve years, some years in Cyprus, divided island like his own, and nine years with Ulster Defense Regiment in Northern Ireland.

“One week I was throwing stones at the British Army,” he said, laughing, recalling how the loyalists saw the arrival of the army in 1969 to protect Catholic neighborhoods as a betrayal of

loyalism.

"And the next week I signed on [to the army] and went on the other side."

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After twelve years in the military, he got out. It is at this point that he is purported to have joined the Red Hand Commando. After all, he had a unique skill set.

"I was trained to kill," he said.

The Red Hand Commando was a small organization, unlike the massive community-defense paramilitary Ulster Defence Association that numbered tens of thousands of members or the mid-sized, yet frighteningly violent Ulster Volunteer Force. Although it was aligned with the UVF, the Red Hand Commando was more secretive. In David's words, "more dedicated. More," he paused, "vicious."

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The "red hand" of the Red Hand Commandos has been a symbol in Ulster, this northern province of the island of Ireland, for hundreds of years. Like everything here, there's a dispute about its origins, but my favorite is the one that refers to a particularly illuminating, if gruesome, Ulster tale. The tale goes that two brothers (or two competing warriors) set off to claim new land. The king has promised that the first one to touch the land with his hand would lay claim to it. One of the brothers, having fallen behind the other and despairing that he'll lose his chance, cuts off his hand and throws it onto the shore, thus claiming it first. The legend tells us that the land is more valuable than our own physical well-being, and that we must risk our bodies to belong to it. The "red hand" story also sounds like a metaphor for the battle between Catholics and Protestants, between the Irish and the British, in this corner of the island—with each side willing to go to absurd lengths to claim ownership.

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There are moments in Northern Ireland that make you sit back in astonishment. It was hard to imagine that this blue-eyed fellow, with his scholarly glasses and his tendency to joke, could have killed me during the Troubles simply because I was Catholic. That instead of doing a slide show, showing us slide after slide of the causes and consequences of the Troubles, he could have picked me off from a far window, a well-trained hand wrapped around the grip and his right eye peering through a high-powered scope.

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At this point, David clicked the slide show off and decided to go off script, turning now directly to us, or nearly so, looking over our heads at whatever past hovered there. Raymond sat completely in the back, next to the wall, riveted as us American visitors.

The Red Hand Commando offered a political analysis of loyalism in Northern Ireland. What may have begun as a defense of territory had evolved. They knew that the state, the United Kingdom's security apparatus, would not be enough to stop the IRA's armed struggle. Ever since 1972's Bloody Friday, loyalists had answered the call to defend their communities and to take the battle to the other side. Loyalism was, in this analysis, not simply British nationalism, but an understanding that the working-class communities who had been loyal to the UK had been abandoned. Though he'd gone through sniper training in the British Army, it was not killing that drew him. It was ending the killing.

The RHC's political vision was best articulated by the Progressive Unionist Party. As early as the mid-1970s, loyalists like Gusty Spence were actively seeking an end to the conflict and to improve the health and welfare of the working class. In 1985, they'd produced a document known as "Sharing Responsibility," which declared its socialist unionism and its commitment "to

restoring consensus politics to [Northern Ireland]." It would be one of the many documents that would feed into the wider peace process.

Still, the way to get there, in David's words, "meant removing people who were against the peace process."

The analysis stopped my breath. The Red Hand Commando believed, in the darkest hours of the Troubles, that they could "deliver peace by delivering violence" to the Catholic civilians.

So much bloodshed, the tit for tat killings between paramilitaries had reached its nadir not only in terror bombings, but also in the more intimate torments of the Shankill Butcher murders in the 1980s, in which a gang of UVF killers tortured their victims, pulling teeth out with pliers, cutting their heads off. Or in the IRA's murders of Ulster Defence Regiment soldiers, who were also found tortured to death.

The Red Hand Commandos, David admitted, had a strange idea: "You needed to cause suffering to bring people to end the conflict. To sicken them. You had to make ordinary decent people feel the conflict…. You kill one of us, we'll double the number. We will put the body count higher than you. It was successful because it drove the IRA into a ceasefire, however, the targets sometimes were innocent people. It's easier. You're looking for numbers, you're not looking for quality. You're looking for quantity."

I couldn't help but notice that he turned to the second person, as if to deflect from the awful truth of it. This is the mad logic of war: increasing sectarian killings might cause the whole populace to cry out for a peace. I don't know what David did, and he's not sharing the specificity of the suffering he caused.

It was suddenly hot in the room, and my pulse raced.

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On July 23, 1989, a Catholic named John Devine, according to the BBC news report, "was shot dead in west Belfast…. He was sitting in his living room on Fallswater Street with his 13-year-old son when three men forced their way in and shot him." He worked as a coalman, delivering coal to houses for heating. He was the father of three.

At the 2016 trial of Winston Churchill (aka "Winkie") Rea, an alleged member of the Red Hand Commando, John Devine's son Sean testified about what happened that day:

> We heard a rap at the front inside door. I got up and went out to the hall to answer it. Before I was able to do this, a man opened it and he walked into the house, straight past me. There were two men behind him. The first one was carrying a dull, silver-coloured revolver. They told me they were the IRA and that they were taking over the house. I saw all three of these men walk into the living room, where daddy was sitting. I heard one shot and then I heard my daddy groaning. I immediately ran out into the street and started shouting for help. I was really screaming. I then heard two or three more shots and then about 15 seconds later all three men ran out from the house… I ran back into the house. I went into the living room and found daddy lying on the floor. I think he was alive still. I think his heart was still beating. The blood was flowing from a wound to his right side.

I think he was alive still. I think his heart was still beating. Alive still. Heart still. Beating. Alive still. The past is never dead. *Flowing from a wound to his right side*. The past is *I heard. I ran. I started shouting*. *The blood flowing.*

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Sometimes, even Protestants felt the Red Hand's calculated violence. Michael Anderson was shot for the crime of being an informer. He was murdered without trial.

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From the archive:

Before dawn on April 6, 1994, Evelyn Wright received a phone call from a taxi driver, trying to confirm her address, purportedly to drop off her daughter Margaret.

Margaret, age thirty-one, was out late, unexpectedly, and did not come home that night.

The next day, police were tipped off, and raided a band hall, where they found blood on the floor of a storeroom, and began a wider search.

A half mile away, behind an abandoned house, Margaret was found dead, crumpled inside a wheeled trash receptacle. She had been wheeled there, according to one source, still breathing. However, she had been beaten so badly with pool cues that the police didn't realize she'd been shot four times in the head as well.

No one quite knows why she wound up at the band hall, but she was likely beaten because she was mistaken for a Catholic.

James McConnell, the pastor of the Protestant church her family attended, remembered her as a "lovely, quiet and sweet girl, completely harmless." She had epilepsy, and, according to McConnell, "she would go into deep depression afterwards but for the last five or six months she had been in wonderful form."

The murder was so gruesome that, one year after the killing, the Red Hand Commando killed one of their own, an RHC man named Billy Elliott.

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The list goes on. Most of those killed during the Troubles are unsolved murders, including those by the disciplined and secretive Red Hand Commando. There's no way to know whether David participated in any of them.

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David leaned back in his chair, his arms raised and his hands knitted behind his head, then leaned in again, trying to narrow the gulf between us and him, between his present self and the one who felt such a strong sense of belonging that he was willing to murder.

"Fighting for peace," he joked, "is like fucking for virginity."

I laughed. I laughed because it was funny, and also because everything about the Red Hand's strategy seemed both completely logical and completely insane.

It was at that moment that David reminded me of my father. A veteran of the Vietnam War who served on South Vietnamese patrol gunboats, my father didn't see much combat, except when combat came to him in Saigon during the Tet Offensive in 1968. Yet that war marked him indelibly. When he finally came home, the war came home with him too. Like David, my dad did not let things go easily. After a year or two working in counterinsurgency, training in California, my dad went into psychotherapy—first as a patient and then as a doctor himself.

As with my father, David has a surface intensity, a ferocity that no doubt can flare into anger. I have yet to see it, but I've felt it. Yet beneath that layer is an equally fierce desire to look oneself in the mirror without looking away. To refuse to rationalize his own violence and his capacity for doing wrong. To feel the wounds of the violence he has done to others, and therefore, in some hidden logic of the universe, to himself as well.

And beneath those layers, still another layer—an ability to laugh at himself and the madness of war.

But still further, underneath the unending self-examination and the awareness of one's flaws and damage, there's something else. A bracing tenderness beyond language. A desire to do good, to do right, to help the vulnerable—not simply because they are vulnerable, but

because we are all vulnerable.

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David was silent for a moment, then asked for questions. My colleague Dianna asked David about loyalist paramilitaries today, years after the Good Friday Agreement. They've often been accused of getting involved in a variety of illegal activities, including drug-dealing. He said that it was certainly true, but that it was also true that loyalists had played a crucial role in ending the Troubles—something that few official narratives talk about.

"The only reason the peace process is ongoing is because of loyalists." For him, only loyalist paramilitaries have stuck to the terms of the peace and have not taken up arms again. This was a totally new view of loyalism to me. In fact, loyalists, in David's view, have been even more disciplined than the republican movement, known for its group solidarity and discipline. After all, dissident Republicans broke the ceasefire with the Omagh bombing in 1998, and killed two British Army fusiliers and two police officers in the 2000s.

And not only that. After the 1994 ceasefire that would lead to the 1998 Good Friday peace, the Combined Loyalist Military Command, led by loyalist paramilitaries like UVF leader Gusty Spence, actually issued an apology for the killing that happened during the Troubles. The language is direct and unflinching, and full of openness: "In all sincerity, we offer to the loved ones of all innocent victims over the past twenty-five years, abject and true remorse. No words of ours will compensate for the intolerable suffering they have undergone during the conflict."

Loyalist paramilitaries have kept the peace, even though some section of the unionist community has never accepted the Good Friday Agreement. Loyalists feel as if they are talked at or talked about more than they are listened to or represented. At the same time, Sinn Fein—the political wing of the now-disbanded IRA—has an interest in undermining the smooth

functioning of government in Northern Ireland, since that's not part of the ultimate plan of a united Ireland.

In the end, the peace process was a leap of faith for everyone. They all shared the risk. Though the loyalist side won, they also worry every day about losing their identity in a united Ireland. The troubles today are not the Troubles of the past, given the rise of a nonsectarian population in Northern Ireland. The more you talk to people in East Belfast like David, the more it seems like a lot of other places throughout the world, where people struggle for housing, health care, jobs, and hope. I'd been thinking of peace as an end to the murder, but another kind of violence had preceded the killing, and continues to this day.

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David's loyalism is nothing if not complex. Even though loyalists are often associated with royalism, having an undying support of the Crown, David is a republican—just not an Irish republican. A socialist and dedicated trade unionist, he hates the monarchy. British identity, for him, isn't about the royal family. And in the end, what concerns him most is his working-class community, one that has never gained a peace dividend.

As part of REACH, David hoped to do his part in the peace process. "If you're willing to give up your life for your country," he said, "then you should be willing to give help to your community. There's a quote from trade unionist Sean Morrissey I like: 'love of country is not signified by oppression of a minority, but by the full and free participation in the life of a nation by its entire people.'"

"For me," David said," it's about basic needs and the basic rights of the human being."

David's view is countercultural, because the dominant Protestant unionist community has often held to a conservative, Protestant, pro-capitalist ideology, despite capitalist globalization's

destruction of Belfast's once-proud shipbuilding industry, where the working-class men of East Belfast had worked for generations. From just outside REACH, we can see the last yellow cranes from Harland and Wolff in the distance, which stand as a monument only to that past. The closest now we can get to seeing shipbuilding is in the Titanic Museum, where a ride through a simulated shipbuilding factory takes you through the process of putting a ship together, from the hellish bellows to the deafening hammering of white-hot bolts to make the hull.

"I'm not religious. I'm an atheist, but I was brought up a Christian. When I hear about Jesus, about helping the lame, the poor, that screams socialist to me. If I say I'm a socialist, or Bernie Sanders is a socialist, he's the devil. We have demonized people who want to make things better for their community and even for their families. And want to do in a caring way. That's what happens within unionism and loyalism as well. For a time, mainstream unionism was afraid of them. They were talking about education underachievement, poor standard of living, poor wages, poor health, injustices. Paramilitaries were branded as Reds. We demonize 'Them'uns.' We forget about the real thing: is their child going hungry. Is their child getting educated."

After post-peace arguments with people from the Republican movement, in which he found himself unable to argue his side, David dedicated himself to learning the history of these islands. What he found was a far more complex story than the one he'd learned in school and on the streets. It began with the United Irishmen. The United Irishmen, whose liberal leadership featured Protestants and Catholics who identified as Irish, led an uprising against British rule in 1798, which failed to overthrow the government. Leading United Irishmen like Theobald Wolfe Tone were Presbyterians, called "dissenters" for their religious refusal to accept Anglicanism, and thus were punished by England's 17th and 18th century Penal Laws, designed to suppress disloyalty against the King. The fact that Protestants—not only the dissenters but also Anglicans

and members of the Protestant ascendancy—would have identified as Irish is still remarkable, and a moment in the history where sectarianism was not the rule.

"They fought all the old battles," he said, marveling at the different way he now saw things.

(When he pronounced battles, it sounded like "bottles." I wondered for a moment whether the whole thing could have been solved over drinks at the pub.)

Despite his full commitment to the peace, David is aware of the ways in which the peace is tenuous, and how political leaders have failed to move the process forward. "The flaw within the Good Friday Agreement is that there was a limited time. It was something that could be built on. We [paramilitaries] created the space, but the politicians didn't pick up the ball." Not only have the political parties failed to extend the peace in any meaningful way, they have occasionally created further division in Northern Ireland. "The mainstream will demonize to hold onto power," David said.

But David is actively opposing sectarianism not only through his work, but also in his own life. David took classes to learn the Irish language. Irish language is often considered so politicized that loyalists reflexively hate even the sound of it.

"I loved it because I could wind people up," he said, with a gleam in his eyes. "Here I am, a bald tattooed thing learning Irish."

Learning Irish challenges the sectarian narratives on both sides.

"It's easy to stick with one story, not hold onto several strands. It's easy to argue if there's one story, but there's no one story."

He remembered that his grandad had books in Irish, and always had a passion for history. He loves being able to order drinks in Irish, and served in the Irish regiment in the British Army. But that doesn't mean that he's ready for a United Ireland. "The mantra of the IRA was *Brits*

Out," he said. "That's me. My family and my connections go through to the late 1600s. Think about that date, and when America was colonized. My family could have been here longer than your ancestors have been in America. Think about if the Indians came to you and said, it's our land. The reality of the world is: where hasn't been conquered? Where hasn't been settled? We could do that in Ireland! What about the Pre-Celts? It's a barrier to peace here."

Irish language is not just Irish, but Gaelic, which is spoken also in Scotland. According to some historical accounts, Scots actually moved *from* Ireland, driven out by the southern Gaels. Every history is more complex than it appears. Ernst Renan once mused in "What is a Nation?" that a nation's essence is "that all its individuals have many things in common, and also that everyone has forgotten many things."

"You call us Planters," David said, referring to the history that terms those who colonized Ireland in the 17th century. "I'm a Stuart, returning back to my own homeland." He paused for effect, hoping we'd catch up.

"It's nonsense, but I could use history like that. You can't just use one date in history to justify your claim. We have to accept all of history."

What would it mean to accept all of a history of a place, not just the part that rhyme with our narrative? What would it look like?

He struggled over his words about why he was so invested in the peace. "We wanted something better for our children and grandchildren," he said.

I tried to imagine him as a granddad, with a child in his lap, and think back to the photo of Seanna Walsh, a leader in the IRA, holding his own grandchild. For a moment, I drift off, not hearing David, just watching his hand fumble for his glasses, as he reads from the latest statement by the Red Hand Commando.

Those hands, David's own hands, that hold the sweet and tender flesh of a grandchild, the hands we shook when entering REACH, the hands that warm themselves around a cup of tea, are also the hands that may have fired bullets, in the name of freedom or defense, into some mother's unlucky child.

* * *

When we went outside, he waved his hand at the loyalist murals again. Of course, there were innocent people who died. But not everyone was innocent. Innocence is too often an alibi for turning away from something awful done to avenge one's own victims.

I looked back at the sign REACH, and suddenly wonder if it's a scrambled anagram—R E H C—for Red Hand Commando. It sank into the pit of my stomach. Could a community organization actually be born out of a violent paramilitary one? Wasn't there another way? Or was this the modern equivalent of swords being turned into ploughshares?

* * *

In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino suggests that we are already living in hell. The question is, how do we bear that reality? He proposes two ways: "The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."

The Red Hand Commando chose to make the inferno burn hotter, so that no one could ignore the flames. Now that the fires have died down, everyone who suffered is still dealing with the burns. Including David. Every day, the fires still burn inside his skin. Talking about the past, and the future, sometimes brings the burning to the surface. Sometimes it soothes.

Right before we parted ways, David reflected, "When I was seeing [the atrocities] when I

was young, on the television, in black and white, you had this anger. You've probably had that anger seeing something on the tv, but it's a momentary thing. But here, it was a *drip drip drip*. That's why I wanted to show you the mural."

But that's only half the story.

"But understand that most of the people that you will have talked to today including myself are not innocent and were never innocent," he said. "We may have been radicalized—that's the new term. But we are not innocent. We will try to convince you there is a reason why we did things, but in reality, it's entirely…. I would not accept it now, as the man I am. Because no life is worth that, no innocent life is worth that. No child's life. No father's life. No daughter's life. No wife's life. Is worth what we were fighting over. The only thing worth fighting over is your education, your faith, your housing, the things that are really there important to sustain yourself. Not a bit of land. Not a square. Not an imaginary sense of your history. But the here and now."

* * *

The week after our visit, David sent an email to Raymond, which Raymond promptly sent along to me.

"Hi Raymond, I get a lot out of the visits. They force me to constantly reevaluate and challenge my perceptions of the conflict and my life. Thank you."

And then David signed off with an Irish phrase: Tóg go bog é. Raymond had no idea what it meant and texted him about it. "It's 'take it easy' in Irish," David replied. After his initial worry, I imagine Raymond felt relieved, reading that. As if he'd found an unlikely friend.

I've often puzzled over why people like David put themselves through the trouble of telling their story to us, a group of outsiders who will never quite know what he went through during the Troubles. Who could easily condemn him for what he'd done.

Yet, as one year cedes to the next, and we reach out to see whether he'd like to meet, David keeps saying yes.

* * *

A few years later, in 2021, our encounters temporarily reduced to Zooms, David doesn't get into specifics about his part in the Troubles, but refuses to gloss over the fact of its nastiness. In his words, "The hurt, the pain, the torture. The criminality."

In some sense, his silence about precisely what he did is not simply a self-protective gesture. It is that. But to share the full story would be to implicate others in the organization, something that they may not agree to. And while some victims may want to know the details about their loved ones' passing, others may be retraumatized by whatever process would begin if the truth were told.

I ask him whether a substantive truth process—like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)—could have laid bare the real history of the Troubles and provided amnesty to the testifiers, thus freeing people like him from being kept endlessly in the shadows.

"There were obstacles," he says, "because we had a leader of the IRA who denied he was ever in it. No unionist would ever believe a word from him." Longtime Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, to this day, and despite a mountain of evidence, denies that he was ever a member of the Irish Republican Army.

"The same would be from the nationalist side: 'how do we know that we're going to get the truth?' From a military point of view, for as a smaller organization…. the likelihood that you could put together the profile of who carried out what—by various little details…. So how do we protect our own, at the same time to help the victims and their families…. When it comes down

to it, there's no trust. And that it doesn't matter. You can get something for the victims, but it's still not enough. It's not going to be closure."

Perhaps that's true of every conflict. Closure, healing, complete reconciliation—they are fictions that even the vaunted South African process could not deliver. Not even close. As we head out of our Zoom, David says he's exhausted, but he's got to be heading onto another Zoom—with stakeholders doing backdoor conversations on peace between Israelis and Palestinians. It could be awhile yet, he says, this search for peace.

* * *

In 2022, back in Belfast after two years of the pandemic, we came to East Belfast but, as happens when we schedule back-to-back-to-back meetings, we missed our small window to meet up with David. At a lunch outside Skainos, Raymond spotted David, on his way from the gym. I took a photo of the greeting. In his suit and tie, white-haired Raymond leans on his umbrella, looking softly round, as he shares a few unheard words with David.

Across from him, David stands, shaven-headed as usual, in a blue tank top and athletic shorts, his stance wide and arms crossed. He's rail-thin, his legs spindly but strong. He's all angles, in contrast to Raymond's softness. I suddenly see, for the first time, David's many tattoos that sleeve his arms and legs. On his left upper arm, a dagger with wings, covered with a little banner that reads, "WHO CARES WHO WINS."

Raymond and David couldn't look more different. They couldn't be more different, in so many ways. From different social classes, different cultural backgrounds, Raymond and David made different decisions when the Troubles came. Yet they both grew up here and lived through—and keep living through—a past that is inked as those tattoos on David.

What I see now, looking at the photo again, is what I felt then: Raymond no longer looks

afraid. Like so many others in Raymond's eyes, David has crossed that invisible border into the wide country of friendship.

* * *

In the process of discussing the ramifications of this piece, I told David that I didn't want to put him at risk. That I wanted him to be comfortable with it.

David replied, "There's always a risk."

"I think it adds to the conversation," I said.

"It's a conversation we're not allowed to have."

Despite all the work of the peace process, crucial stories were being left out. The UK government, again and again, wants to be rid of the Troubles. The newest legislation would effectively end all Troubles-era investigations, putting a stop to every inquest, commission, or case by 2024. But the refusal to listen to those who lived through them, even those who engaged in violence, would mean that much will be lost. Including the terrible damage of war.

"If I became a born-again Christian," David joked, "I could call it my testimony."

* * *

History doesn't stand still, as we don't stand still. In 2023, since REACH had closed, David joined us at Skainos across the street. And memories don't leave us alone. Every time we enter the house of memory, another dark corner is revealed. Twenty-five years after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, when our group sat with David again in Belfast, he shared another memory that he hadn't before. He was eighteen, serving in Cyprus with the Irish Rangers regiment of the British Army, part of a UN peacekeeping mission. "I watched as a sixteen-year-old Turkish conscript was shot in the back of the head by his own officer, for failing to do his duty. That was my first window into that sort of violence."

At the end of another difficult talk, sensing his weariness, I asked him what brings him joy.

"I suppose," he said, "hearing the laughter of my grandchildren. Children running about, being happy."

And it struck me how, whether or not intentionally, David was harmonizing with Bobby Sands, a martyr for the other side of that conflict, who once said, "our revenge will be the laughter of our children."

* * *

A month later on a Zoom, I asked him if his trauma impacted his family life.

"Well," he said, "I'm sittin' here on my own."

The orange wall behind him was entirely bare. I noticed it now.

He laughed, and I laughed with him. He wasn't completely—in this conversation, and in life. Despite his joke, he does get time with his grandkids. But there was something desolate in him, some loneliness that I could not touch.

I asked him what he wanted people to get out of his story.

"We all want to be loved," he said, "but if you looked at me, there's a darker side."

He shares more that I can't share here. Any true picture of a person, and of a society, must contend with the dark side. We may never know what David did during the Troubles, but his honesty and remorse are real. That's why I keep going back to David. Because, in some sense, David is like every one of us, only more so. And unlike so many of us, he refuses to accept any rationalization for what he sees now as what is unjustifiable and perhaps unforgiveable.

In the end, he realized that although he got a buzz from conflict, helping someone felt even better. When he talks about helping others, he sounds like so many people of faith I know, who draw such pleasure from serving others. But he has no belief in God. He's a priest without a

religion, a soldier without a gun, working gently, with open hands.

I asked him how he would like to be remembered.

He paused for a long time.

"Well, I'm not really fussed," he said. "All I care about is how my children will remember me. I don't care how the rest of the world remembers me."

He paused again, looking around the empty room.

"That they were loved. That I was capable of love."

Philip Metres has written thirteen books, including *Dispatches from the Land of Erasure* (2025). Winner of three Arab American Book Awards, a Guggenheim, and a Pushcart Prize, he is professor of English and director of the Peace, Justice, & Human Rights program at John Carroll University and teaches at VCFA MFA low-residency program.