

LIVING WITH WAR

A BELFAST YEAR



"She combines intellectual objectivity with courage.
The men, women, and children of Belfast leap to life."

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SALLY BELFRAGE



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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LIVING WITH WAR

Sally Belfrage, who was born in California, now lives in London. She wrote her first book when she was twenty-one: *A Room in Moscow*, describing the six months she had just spent working for a Russian publishing house. Next was *Freedom Summer*, an account of her experiences when working in a civil-rights project in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. Her third book, *Flowers of Emptiness*, explored the reasons why the teachings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh appealed to so many of her contemporaries.

Preface

When I first thought of going to Belfast, it wasn't Northern Ireland itself that drew me. I had no image of Northern Ireland beyond the very black-and-white and bored one that outsiders tend to have of the place. What concerned me to begin with were various abstractions. War in the long-term – how one can live, particularly how women could live, at such a pitch of constant antagonism and danger. Commitment to an idea – that dedication to an idealistic future which can transcend, or even forfeit, the real lives of those it is meant to benefit. This is a theme I have written about before; here was a place where – from a distance, anyway – people seemed to be willing to go so far as to kill one another for the sake of perfecting life. I imagined their struggle, when I imagined it, as similar to Beirut's, an unstoppable engine of tragedy, travelling on and on independent of its causes. But as I've said, I knew nothing about it.

As things worked out, these elements inevitably came into the picture, but what I hadn't reckoned on was the quality of life I found in Belfast: people who were warm and involved and alive, and whom I loved more than any group I had ever encountered. These particular people are sustained by stories: their talk is magical. More perhaps than any other society, they convey their histories through song, verse, and *crack* – an Irish word meaning the talk, or the ambience, or what's going on. They depend on their mythologies to explain themselves and their actions, and it soon seemed to me that hearing them speak was the best way to get near an understanding of the war. The fact that there are at least three conflicting mythologies may make their situation more deadlocked; it certainly makes the listening more extraordinary. In the end I learned more about the place from listening than from my two yards of books.

I spent a year travelling every month to Belfast from London, where I live, staying for a week or more with, and listening to, the families who were becoming friends. I have given some people

different names, but what they said, they said – although what they said could sometimes depart widely from the objective situation. I travelled around their beautiful countryside and to other towns in Northern Ireland, but have restricted my book to Belfast, because I had to limit it somewhere and everyone everywhere seemed to have something important to say.

The issues involved in the Northern Ireland war are endlessly complicated, if only because a war can hardly stand still, and there have been nearly two decades of new twists and embellishments, atrocities and peace initiatives. Add to this the different interpretations given to each development, so that there is never a theme without a counterpoint. But the basic situation does not change. For those who approach the subject from scratch as I did, I have tried to sum up the issues at stake – in what must be a very oversimplified way – in an introduction.

There are many people to thank – most of all the ones in the book, the many more who are not because of space, and the people who can't be named at all. Those who can: Tony Gifford, Nan Fromer, Bill Pirie, Susan Griffin, Desmond Fennell, Eleanor Goldschmied, Helena Kennedy, Fred Wiseman, Sylvia Meehan, Liz Curtis, Gordon Heald, Ted Smyth, Bob and Decca Treuhaft, Frances Murray, the late Henry Nash Smith, Paddy and Teresa Devlin, Anne Cadwallader, Pauline and Donal Murphy, Eileen Evason, Steven and Patricia Smith, Kate Kelly, Tony and Jean Lynch, Joanna McMinn, Marie Mulholland, Mary Clemmey, Steven Greer, Michelene Wandor, Alger and Isabel Hiss, Lynda Edgerton, Prof. John A. Murphy, Alison Lurie, Richard Kershaw, Liane Aukin, Lin Solomon, Maria Empira and Rosmarie Epaminondas, Anthony Sheil, all the people at the MacDowell Colony and at Annaghmakerrig and the Kilburn Bookshop, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; and Diana Athill and Elisabeth Sifton.

This book is dedicated to the people of Belfast, with love and gratitude.

Introduction

THE BACKGROUND

Northern Ireland is the one-fifth of Ireland at the top right-hand corner which remained part of the United Kingdom when the rest of the island got independence in 1921. About 600,000 of the Northern population are Catholic, think of themselves as Irish, and many of them want a united Ireland. About 900,000 are Protestant, think of themselves as British, and most want to remain as they are. The British government is pledged to support this desire so long as it is reflected in an electoral majority within the province.

There is no neutral name for the place. The British call it "Northern Ireland", but the Protestants say "Ulster" – which the Catholics reject because the boundaries include only six of the nine counties of true Ulster, one of the four ancient provinces of the island. Catholics often refer to "the Six Counties" or "the North of Ireland" and call the Republic of Ireland "the Twenty-six Counties" or "the Free State". "Eire" is unacceptable unless the speaker is using the Irish language, because the name is meant to refer to the whole island, and in hostile British mouths suggests that their truncated country is in fact complete.

The British have been in Ireland, in one form or another, for eight hundred years. Resistance, often confused and mistimed, sprang up occasionally from different quarters, most notably from the United Irishmen in 1798 and half a century later from the Fenians* (still used as a term of abuse by Protestants of Catholics). The 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, followed by a war of independence, led to the limited victory of partition and freedom for the South; it also led to a demoralizing civil war fought partly over the issue of this very concession to Britain. But ultimately partition reduced the area of conflict and diluted its force. Nevertheless in each succeeding decade there were outbreaks of sectarian fighting,

*A glossary of Northern Irish names and phrases begins on page 301.

put down in months or years but contributing to the alienation of Catholics and a sense of siege among Protestants.

In 1968, civil-rights marchers in Northern Ireland, modelling their movement after the one in the American South, tried to gain equal voting, housing, and employment rights for Catholics from the Protestant regime at Stormont (the province's then seat of power in the capital, Belfast). Their demands were resisted by the Protestants with most of the apparatus of the state, and serious rioting began. The British sent the army, initially to protect the Catholics from sectarian violence but very soon to protect the status quo. The Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army) came into being and the Protestants later began constructing their own paramilitary setup.

In the summer of 1971 the British arrested, and subsequently interned without charge or trial, hundreds of alleged IRA men – many of them innocent. Such mass incarcerations had been periodically used in the 1920s, 1940s and 1950s; but this time virtually the entire Catholic community erupted in violence. IRA recruitment soared. In 1972, in a period of apparently endless sectarian carnage, the British suspended the Stormont government and instituted Direct Rule. Since then almost every phase of life has been run by Westminster, as represented by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and a British Secretary of State in residence at Stormont. Most of the petty injustices to Catholics have been, belatedly, removed, but the major grievance – that the British are there at all – remains, and while it remains the fighting continues.

After the first decade of killing, the conflict began to develop the characteristics of an institution, almost with rules. Thus for instance it has never taken to the air, and is conducted almost wholly with the gun, home-made mortar, and carefully targeted car bomb (a Northern Irish invention). More than 2,500 people have died, but by now little of the violence is random. Each side has its paramilitary organizations: the Irish Republican Army attacks the British security forces – or their local Protestant representatives; and the Protestant paramilitaries fight the IRA (and also, sporadically, the security forces, or simply Catholics).

It is not a religious war, nor is religious tolerance strictly an issue. Religion is more a badge of identification to distinguish two traditions, two tribal identities, two perspectives on the past, two views of cultural superiority, two sets of mind about the border

dividing Ireland, two kinds of fear. Both groups are minorities: one within the province, one within the island. Because their arguments are usually mutually exclusive, it is necessary to look at them separately.

Most of the Protestants in Northern Ireland descend from Presbyterian Scots brought over by the British in the "Ulster Plantation" of 1609–10 to farm land taken from the native Irish. Others have come down from the Ascendancy, the ruling British land-owning class who were high-church Anglicans. There was Protestant–Catholic conflict from the start, allegiances called upon by one faction or another fighting for power in Britain and Europe and playing out the struggle across the Irish Sea. At a pivotal point in 1690 the Protestant (Dutch) William of Orange defeated the Catholic (English) King James II at the Battle of the Boyne. To this day Protestants celebrate the Orange victory on the Twelfth of July.

Their side, however, was once less single-minded than is today recognized. The Presbyterians too were victims, though never so much as the Catholics, of Westminster and the Ascendancy – which passed a law in 1704 repudiating their clergy and prohibiting Presbyterians from serving in the law, the army, the civil service, or education. As a result a flood of Ulster Presbyterians left for North America, where (known as the Scotch-Irish) they became the staunchest revolutionaries, western frontiersmen, and Indian fighters, and contributed ten presidents to the United States. (It may be worth reminding Americans who question the legitimacy of the Protestants' claim to Ulster that they have been there since before the *Mayflower* set sail.) Those Presbyterians who were left behind maintained a tradition of dissent which led some, by the end of the eighteenth century, to found, with Catholics, the Society of United Irishmen – to "break the connection with England, the never failing source of all our political evils," as Wolfe Tone, Protestant leader, put it in 1798. The rebellion was savagely crushed by the English. On a few occasions since, Protestants and Catholics have found common cause, though never for long. Most Ulster Protestants would now disavow anything of the sort and claim to have been at one then as now: firm in their opposition to the threat of Gaelic infringement on their institutions and absorp-

tion by a foreign power. To them Northern Ireland is as much a part of the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" as Scotland or Wales (although their status, as the title indicates, is not in fact the same), and calling themselves "Irish", as some do, means no more than "Welsh" or "English". Essentially they are the British who remained loyal when the South broke away, and only the British guarantee protects their survival. They view Dublin's territorial claims on them as an imperialist affront – Article 2 of the Republic's 1937 Constitution insists that "the national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland" – and view the Northern Catholics as subversives.

As most Catholics see it, Ireland is their island, all of it, and having been the first colony of England they are now the last. In the North their dispossession by invading planters was only another injustice England visited upon Ireland over the centuries in which any attempt to assert their independence was brutally overpowered. The English banned their religion and culture, prevented them from owning land, forbade their schools, forced the Church underground, and protected English interests by discriminatory trade practices which impoverished Ireland. In the great famine of 1845–9, English absentee landlords shipped home grain and meat while the Irish starved, died in epidemics or emigrated, ultimately reducing the population by half. After partition, Protestant agents of the colonizers encouraged continuing Catholic emigration by refusing Catholics work, taking the best housing, populating the forces of the law, and gerrymandering voting districts to ensure their continuing power. The border had been arbitrarily drawn in any case, specifically to assure a perpetual Protestant majority. The gerrymandering of the smaller districts may since have been abolished, but to many Catholics the whole province is one monstrous gerrymander. They feel they belong with the South, their flag is its green-white-and-orange tricolour, their anthem its "Soldier's Song", and their goal: "A Nation Once Again".

To the Ulster Protestants, Ireland was never a nation anyway, but a land of warring chieftains, not once united except under the British in the nineteenth century. It was Protestant money and Protestant industry (if not exclusively Protestant muscle) with which Belfast became one of the richest cities in the British Isles. Having given their all in Britain's defence in two world wars,

believing in the Protestant work ethic and upholding “the good old-fashioned honest Anglo-Saxon virtues,” they feel profoundly misunderstood and betrayed. While many of them decry the discrimination and injustice which led to the present “Troubles”, they remain steadfast subjects of the Crown embattled against its enemies. Many also are apprehensive of Catholicism (though not necessarily of Catholics) and have contempt for and fear of “Roman” rituals and what they regard as the Church’s interference in every sphere of life in the South. Having been stripped of their privilege since the early 1970s with nothing to show for it but an anarchic society and the continuing deaths of their people at the hands of gunmen whose tacit, if not legal, support from the South enables them to train and hide, they see concessions to Catholics as appeasements, sops to disguise what the Catholics really want: a united Ireland, and for Protestants to disappear. Deprived of “their” Stormont government and “their” police force (the “B” Specials, disbanded by Britain in 1970), they see any further compromise as part of an inexorable process to divest them of what they hold dear: the Crown, *God Save the Queen*, the Union Jack and their Protestant heritage. “We will fight anybody to remain British, even the British.” NO SURRENDER. NOT AN INCH.

There has been some talk of forming an independent Ulster. A history supports this, of a time BC when a people called the Cruthin ruled the area and were at continual war with people of the south. At one point there was a mass exodus across the thirteen miles of open sea to Scotland – a simple enough voyage undertaken since pre-history – thus providing its name, since the Romans there called the new arrivals Scotti. The Ulster Plantation many centuries later was therefore a matter of native Ulstermen *returning home* – divided now by war and the Reformation from their ethnic countrymen.

The Catholics react to the Cruthin story with some disdain. It is unprovable and irrelevant and doesn’t interest them. Their sense of the past resides more securely in living folk memory. In any case the enemy to them is not the Protestants but the British, the fight directed against the armed representatives of the Crown, even (or all the more) if they happen to be Irish. Catholics say that those Protestants who acknowledge their own Irishness are welcome to share in a future united Ireland. To this the Protestants reply that even if they did so willingly, they are in danger of being culturally

dominated and absorbed – as has happened in the Republic, where since 1921 the proportion of Protestants has gone from 10 per cent to 3 per cent.

The names they call themselves can be hard to follow. Most Catholics in Northern Ireland are “Nationalists” or “Republicans”, and most Protestants are “Unionists” or “Loyalists”. It is not as simple as Protestants being loyal to the Union with Britain and Catholics nationalist about an all-Ireland republic. While most Catholics are Nationalists, Sinn Féin (pronounced Shin Fane – the political wing of the IRA) reserves to itself the term Republican, leaving the broader classification, Nationalist, to the moderate party of the majority of Catholics, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Protestants are “Unionists” through their allegiance to various Unionist parties, particularly the Official Unionists and the Democratic Unionists (led by Ian Paisley). “Loyalist” can be equivalent to “Republican” since it is how the more extreme Protestant groupings describe themselves.

Each side has its own fighters who not only take on the enemy but police their own people with their own brand of vigilante law. Paramilitarism is a big and proliferating business. The initials of different groups are thrown at one at such a rate that it helps to realize that if the letters contain an “I” for Ireland the organization is Catholic, and if they have a “U” for Ulster it is Protestant.

On the Catholic side, the IRA, correctly the *Provisional* IRA (colloquially “the Provisionals”, “Provos”, “Proxies” or just “the Rah”), which is the military wing of *Provisional* Sinn Féin, split, in 1970, from what then became known as the *Official* IRA, over the latter’s emphasis on a political rather than a military campaign. The “Officials” have since mostly been absorbed into the Workers’ Party, which condemns violence, and have turned to class politics. This move created another split: the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP, known as “the Irps”), whose own military wing, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), pursues armed conflict. As well, the IRA has a women’s auxiliary, Cumann na Mban (pronounced almost like “common-a-man”), with a similar military structure. The IRA, Cumann na Mban, and INLA are illegal, with membership alone earning seven years’ imprisonment.

For the other side, as well as the overwhelmingly Protestant Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), a locally recruited unit attached to the British army, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the

police, there are the paramilitary Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The UDA is legal and the UVF illegal. But the UDA has an illegal cover, the Ulster Freedom Fighters. New groups are constantly being formed, or new/old groups, such as the Protestant Action Force, the Ulster Defence Force, Ulster Clubs.

Because so many people live on the "broo" (social security), there is the peculiarity of the British government paying the upkeep (such as it is) of people who seek to destroy it. In another anomaly, compensation is paid to victims of violence, not just their own but each other's, and while British soldiers are seldom held legally accountable for killing and maiming, nonetheless the British government often gives compensation to the victims or their families. There are other knots. While the IRA is banned, Sinn Fein is not; but representatives of the British government will not speak to Sinn Feiners. There is a major contradiction in the law: although paramilitaries who are caught by the authorities are no longer given prisoner-of-war status – as they were before 1976 – but are considered mere criminals, they are tried in special "Diplock Courts" which allow uncorroborated evidence and have dispensed with juries. At the same time the "ODC", or Ordinary Decent Criminal, receives traditional British justice. Also, despite British insistence that Northern Ireland is part of the same country, there are Northerners who are prohibited from setting foot on the mainland, and hundreds have been detained, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act – a "temporary" piece of legislation enacted in 1974 which cancels many democratic rights of the Irish on both sides of the water.

Sixty-one per cent of the mainland British, in a February 1987 poll, advocate withdrawal of the British Army from Northern Ireland. But all British political parties still believe that Northern Ireland is a cross they have to bear: that despite the province's costing up to £4 billion a year, there is an obligation to hold to the "Loyalist veto", the bargain made with the Ulster Protestants at the time of partition in which the government promised to maintain their position so long as the voters of Northern Ireland request it. Some

people argue that Northern Ireland has an essential strategic significance to NATO, and that Britain will not withdraw except in exchange for the South's giving up its neutrality.

Meanwhile every few years a new initiative to address the problem is tried. In 1982 the latest of many efforts to get the local parties to cooperate with each other in a new Assembly at Stormont failed when Sinn Fein was barred and the SDLP refused to attend. In 1984 the New Ireland Forum in Dublin recommended as possible solutions a unitary state, a federal state, or joint authority. "Out, out, out!" said Mrs Thatcher, rejecting any diminution of British sovereignty in the North. But in 1985 an Anglo-Irish Agreement at last gave the South some input in the North's affairs – and by so doing united the Unionists in an opposition as profound as that of the Nationalists.

The basic political asymmetry of the Irish island persuades some outsiders that the British are colonialists pure and simple, that the war is against British oppression and for self-determination, and that the British must withdraw. Parallels are constantly found, from Algeria to Israel-Palestine to South Africa. Moral rights are cited, which leave out of consideration the fact that the "right" to any land has generally depended historically on how much of the indigenous population the colonizers have managed to exterminate. Otherwise talk of such rights suggests a last-in first-out solution, as if the Northern Irish were a factory work-force subject to redundancies. Most simply viewed, Britain ought to hand over the North to Dublin, and the Northern Protestants might either lump it or somehow return to the homeland they left three centuries ago.

The most obvious difficulty with this analysis is the refusal of the Protestants to accede to it, and the dedication of their paramilitary forces to defending their actual homeland, never mind Scotland – threatening a far bloodier civil war than anything seen yet. At the end of 1985 there were 123,169 licensed firearms in NI; this leaves out the guns in illegal paramilitary hands. Another problem is the South's commitment to unification and its ability to implement it. Dominated by the Catholic hierarchy and proudly so, Dublin has on the one hand been able to concede nothing in the way of legislation or constitutional change to conciliate Northern Protestants, and on the other has cracked down as hard as the British on the IRA and Sinn Fein. "Re-unification" may be the declared

objective of both main parties in the South, but with the highest unemployment rate in Europe and a chaotic economy, the Republic is in a poor position to fight a civil war, take on the North's subsidy or the cost of bringing Southern social benefits up to par, and to assimilate nearly a million hostile citizens into its own three and a half million population.

These difficulties are not lost on the Irish: the Southern interest in unification, according to various polls, is vague and unenthusiastic the moment it goes beyond the simple statement of an aspiration. In a 1979 survey, 68 per cent of the Irish wanted the island united, but only 45.9 per cent were prepared to pay any extra taxes for it. In addition, 60 per cent believed that Loyalist paramilitaries would be more of a problem in a united Ireland than the IRA is today in the North. In another poll, a majority in the South thought Northern Catholics had more in common with Northern Protestants than with themselves, and that both sides in the North were "extreme and unreasonable". In general, however, the Southern Irish are more interested in maintaining their homogeneous Roman Catholic quality of life than in risking change. Asked in 1982 to list the problems facing their country, just one per cent mentioned the North.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement can be seen as an attempt by Mrs Thatcher to placate world opinion in its virtually universal censure of British moral shortcomings in Northern Ireland. The "embarrassment factor" came from all sides: the Washington Irish lobby, representing forty million US citizens of Irish descent, would not let the issue rest; the Soviet Union rebutted western criticism of its own human rights behaviour by bringing up Northern Ireland. For its part, the Republic of Ireland could not go on tolerating British inactivity in the North, reflected in so much lawlessness and alienation spilling across a three-hundred mile border to infect them too. Two and a half years after the Agreement was signed, nothing of any substance had changed; whether it will have any real effect on the war or on the lives of the Northern Irish remains to be seen.

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IS THERE LIFE BEFORE DEATH?

Like a room so untidy you can barely make out the furniture or even tell with certainty which room it is, Belfast on first sight offended my most basic domestic instincts: derelict buildings, bombsites, barricades, blowing rubbish, graffiti, corrugated iron, barbed wire, the smell of rot, and the final affront – men in khaki pointing guns at you. To see past any of this was at first beyond my capacity.

Within days at least half a dozen people had said in one way or another: “*I can’t* be anywhere else.” – “This is the *only* place to live. I tried Australia but I come back cause I missed the crack.” – “It’s the greatest wee town in the world!” An Englishwoman even said she was “terrified the trendies will hear about it and they’ll all want to move here.” And within days the eyesores had already begun selectively to diminish, as scars on a face fade out when they belong to a friend whose eyes and voice are what count. Nothing about the initial impression, however, gave any hope of this.

The place was full of contradictions. There was a Bacardi billboard showing Telly Savalas surrounded with love, heat and prosperity, itself perched in a heap of debris among crumbling buildings with bricked-up windows. Lots of other buildings had cages around them, but the people were open and unprotected. Everywhere the eye fell, destruction co-existed with survival.

The idea was to walk up the Falls Road, the main artery of the Catholic ghetto of West Belfast, beginning at its most startling bit of architecture, the Divis Flats. Confronting the bleak blocks of high-rises set in a sea of rubble, I didn’t feel too confident about this, but there was nowhere to go but in. One of those huge, hateful system-built estates that look the same everywhere – architects have been known to call them “stack-a-prole” – Divis contained one tall tower and vistas of concrete in six storeys, with a little chipped plastic in primary colours thrown in for brighteners. Just beyond appeared the twin steeples of a large old church. The complex seemed big enough to be a city on its own, if only it had any amenities or made