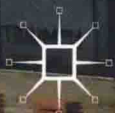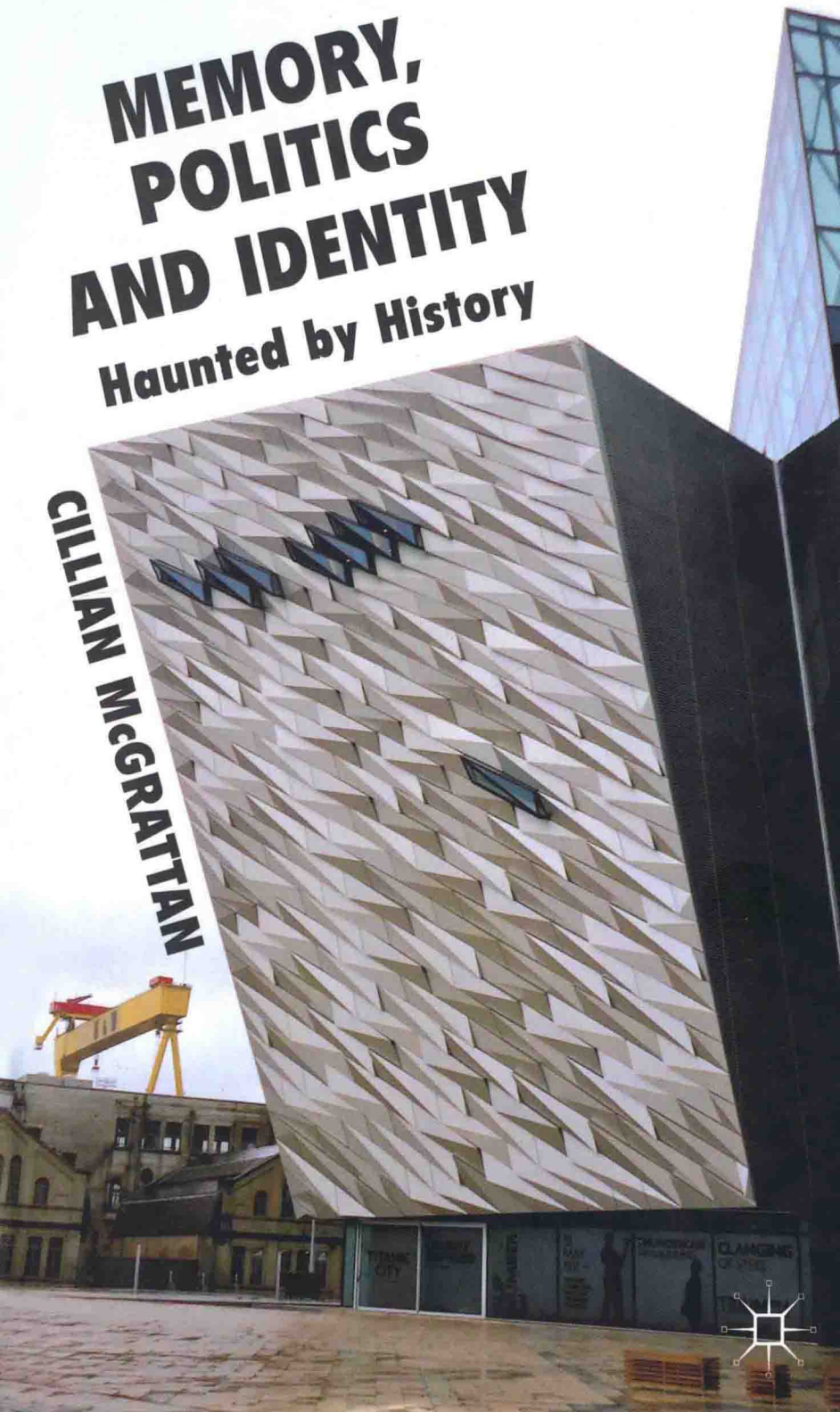# MEMORY, POLITICS AND IDENTITY

Haunted by History

CILLIAN McGRATTAN

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Cillian McGrattan

Lecturer in Political and Cultural Studies, University of Swansea

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Introduction: Remembering and Looking Forward

'British-Irish relations reach an all-time high' proclaimed the nationalist-oriented, Northern Irish daily the *Irish News* following a meeting between Taoiseach Enda Kenny and Prime Minister David Cameron in March 2012.[1] The paper sought to put the meeting in an historical perspective, contrasting the '25-year peace process' with the period of 'almost outright hostility' that had preceded it with the hunger strikes of 1980–1981. In so doing, the paper followed the lead of the two premiers who stated that the series of commemorations beginning with the centenary of the Ulster Covenant in September provided an opportunity to reflect on the 'events that helped shape our political destinies ... We will do so in a spirit of historical accuracy, mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation'. However, they continued, 'we want to ensure that this is a decade not only of remembering but also of looking forward – a decade of renewed and strengthened cooperation between our two countries'.

This book examines the implications behind the Janus-faced imperative for looking to the past with one eye on the future. It looks in particular at how that imperative is being applied to Northern Ireland which witnessed over 3,700 deaths in a period of three and a half decades.[2] It examines how the pernicious self-justifications of terrorists – who were massively repudiated by the general populace and who achieved none of their objectives through violence – have become a pervasive force in the post-conflict discourse. And it suggests that a key reason behind the unquestioning acceptance of that force by sections of the Northern Irish, Irish and British political class – and the promulgation of it by others – lies in a tendency to defer consideration of those thousands of deaths and injuries. The book recognises that at one level the displacement of the victims of terrorist and state killings

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within a progressivist model is not simply politically logical: after all, societies, if not individuals, goes the reasoning, need to move on; resources for dealing with the past, for pursuing perpetrators and for compensating their victims are limited, and anyway, it is extremely difficult to ascertain just who is and who is not a victim – we were all responsible and were all affected in some shape or form. Yet, I argue, this kind of facile reasoning is not enough: the long-term prospects for peace, stability and shared relations are troubled by short-term compromises that see the very language of peace, inclusivity and plurality routed for exigent purposes; and, secondly, it serves to put words into the mouths of those who were on the receiving end of political and sectarian violence.

As such, I argue that the past works on the present in untold, unintended and unexpected ways, and that the imposition of a narrative that implicitly understands peace and settlement to mark some kind of year zero dividing a bad past from a good future is misguided and positively dangerous. I trace this type of understanding through various forms of discourse on and about the Northern Ireland 'transition' – from cultural representations of violence and peace to historical narratives, from transitional and restorative justice schemes to academic models, and from ideologically informed understandings of everyday reality to elite level interventions and lesson-drawing. While this book does not speak for victims – maintaining that to do so further drains those who have been rendered voiceless of agency – the underlying argument is that this discourse and the policy schemes that proceed from it often have the effect of deferring the past and displacing the tragedies and crimes that occurred and the traumas that continue in the present. I suggest that while identities are of course influenced and informed by social contexts, they are not entirely malleable, and ideas about history and the past carry with them a strong residual pull related to ideas about personal and collective identity and are related to the values we wish to see passed on to future generations. Any approach to the past, I argue, must remain cognisant of those values and norms and thus must be guided not only by empirical insights but also ethical obligations. I contend that, apart from a few areas of politics, political science and history, both empirical commitment and ethical awareness are sadly lacking when it comes to approaching Northern Ireland's divided past.

Given the subtlety necessary for approaching violent pasts, such processes of engagement are always liable to political manipulation. In Northern Ireland, for example, the largest nationalist party, Sinn Féin, recently floated the idea of reaching out to their ethnic opponents.

Reconciliation could, the party argued, come about through 'uncomfortable conversations'.³ The party was, it stated, 'prepared to take the lead in helping to shape an authentic reconciliation process and embrace the discomfort of moving outside our political and historic comfort zones'. Yet, a prerequisite to this must surely be to recognise just how comfortable that zone is. Indeed, that is even more of a task for a party that had been the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, which was responsible for 60% of the 3,700 conflict-related deaths. Sadly, Sinn Féin seem incapable of moving beyond formal acceptance of its responsibility of turning its back on a peaceful civil rights movement and initiating a 'war' against the unionist population of Northern Ireland and the British state. Rather than atonement for these historical facts, Sinn Féin seems more interested in harnessing ethnicised narratives for its own ends. Thus, the 'armed struggle', it maintains 'arose from political conditions as a last resort and those conditions no longer exist'.

In a much quoted phrase, Michael Ignatieff argued that the real value of truth recovery processes may not be to contribute to societal reconciliation but is much more limited: they could, he contended, reduce the number of 'lies that circulate unchallenged'.⁴ Of course there can never be one past in any society, not least ethnically divided ones. However, unless the past is articulated in such a way in which the connection of events and experiences are integrated in a real and meaningful way the 'truths' which drove conflict will continue to be reproduced. The problem with this, naturally, is that 'real and meaningful' are in-themselves social constructs; but they do have a basis in the memories of victims and others who lived through the violent past; they are recorded in newspapers, governmental and party political archives and in the marked and unmarked graves across Northern Ireland. Empirical and ethical scrutiny leads, I argue, to a narrative fencing-in: in other words framing narratives about the past means paying attention to those links to the past and excluding through reasoned argument and documentary evidence those ethnicised understandings that try to suggest otherwise.

Unfortunately, in Northern Ireland narrative fencing-in seems to be working in the opposite direction. It is not so much the case that the landscape is lacking real signposts to the past; it is, rather the case that those signposts are increasingly unrealistic and bear almost no resemblance to a past that witnessed so much bloodshed and suffering. I argue that these signposts are not simply physical markers or performative rituals such as murals, gaols, memorials and marches – which

have been extensively documented.[5] Instead, I wish to focus on their roots, which I suggest lie deeper: namely in discursive understandings about 'history'. They can be traced in academic and community-based initiatives such as storytelling or restorative justice projects; they also form the basis of cultural reproductions and analytical norms and methodologies relating to those productions; they also underpin articulations of transitional justice mechanisms and truth recovery processes; and they lie at the heart of structuralist, anti-revisionist, and neo-nationalist accounts of the 'Irish question'. These elements constitute the outer shapes of those understandings and represent the surface level at which the deeper contents of those discourses become visible.

Together these discursive understandings are, in effect, culminating in a reinscription of the past: a process that is known in Germany as *Schlußstrich* – namely, the drawing of a line under the past and the redesignating of it as 'history'.[6] Of course, it could be argued that drawing a line in the sand is an essential part of societies moving forward, beyond contentious and conflictual pasts. This book does not necessarily argue against that argument *per se*; what I do suggest is that the relegation of the past to the margins of society may not only be counterproductive in a transitional society like Northern Ireland's – it is based on wishful thinking: the past continues to influence and shape the present. Instead of sanitising the past, I argue that it needs to be integrated into our historical consciousness – at an empirical and an ethical level. The purpose of this book, therefore, is twofold: firstly, it aims to describe the inscription of self-justifying and self-exculpatory narratives on the Northern Irish state and onto the collective memories of its citizens; and, secondly, it is a modest attempt to write against their stultifying, moralising, silencing and insular effects.

This book unfolds various aspects and angles of this argument through eight chapters. The first chapter outlines attempts to deal with the past in Northern Ireland. It highlights how an intellectual paradigm based on the transitional justice mechanisms in South Africa has become normative with regards to considerations of Northern Ireland's past – often to the detriment of historical accuracy and moral judgement. The second and third chapters look at how this normative discourse has arisen. I suggest that a mode of belatedness, and not simply transition, characterises Northern Irish politics in the movement from conflict to peace. Furthermore, I examine the possibilities and limitations inherent in ethical approaches to the past. I argue that the post-colonial school that has emerged from cultural and literary studies provides a step to developing an ethical approach. However, its rhetorical origins

within nationalistic ideologies and its predilections towards hazily defined socio-economic terms means that it swerves away from the empirical realities of brute political violence and is unable to meet the severe normative challenge that those realities pose. The result can be a tendency to at best wish those realities out of existence by considering them 'representations' or, at worse, indulge their nefarious aftermaths.

Future chapters attempt to meet that challenge by examining the normative basis of narratival representations along with attempting to ground them empirically. Thus Chapter 4 interrogates narratives proceeding from Bloody Sunday and Chapter 5 narratival representations of the hunger strikes. Chapters 7 and 8 examine the implications of transition for Northern Irish nationalism: Chapter 7 looks at the implications of truth recovery for Northern nationalism and argues that the model, as applied in Northern Ireland, tends to be structurally biased towards Sinn Féin's brand of republicanism. Chapter 8 builds on the previous two chapters and argues that a growth of anti-revisionist scholarship has given rise to a resurgence of neo-nationalism one of whose ultimate results is to skewer interpretations of the conflict and rewrite the politics of victimhood. The conclusion attempts to draw some of these strands together by outlining how structuralist approaches to political science work to silence the atrocities of the past in a language of bland cliché, and in so doing, serve to bolster those groups who have a vested interest in rendering the past truly a foreign country.

Acknowledgements

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Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland

This book takes as its starting point the idea that not only does the present shape how we think about the past, but that the past is not entirely mutable since experiences and interpretations of events often endure. The past, of course, is fraught with political import: perceptions of unresolved grievances and injustices are inextricably linked with questions of power by providing rationales for whose voices are heard and whose voices are silenced in the public arena. Likewise, ideas about the past are impossible to divorce from ideas about identity: we articulate who we are in the present in relation to where we have come from and the values and aspirations we wish to see sustained and fulfilled in the future. Of course, these ideas are also imbued with ethical significance and concern our adherence to the beliefs of our forebears as well as our responsibility to future generations. Stories about the past, as the historian and political philosopher Michel de Certeau pointed out, act as a bridge: they give our everyday lives meaning but also act as guides to our future decisions. As such, the politics of the past represents a juncture between everyday life and the 'high politics' of decision-making and policy implementation.[1]

Yet, while it is important to recognise the fundamental importance of the politics of the past, it should also be acknowledged that the past need not necessarily be 'dealt' with as regards to certain aspects of policy: residual problems relating to, for example, segregation, sectarianism, social exclusion, and the violence of 'spoiler' groups can be immediately tackled through dedicated policies in housing or education; rights-based safeguards; and a robust security response. The imperative to 'deal' with the past is, however, a more fundamental demand and involves core ideas about ourselves and the type of society we wish to live in. There is no easy policy fix to that demand and this book rejects simplistic notions

relating to the nurturing of post-conflict identities through the construction of a 'usable past'.[2] Instead, I wish to suggest that the power and identity-based dynamics involved in talking about the past always involve questions relating to the values we wish to bestow to the future: our approach to the past always therefore involves both political and ethical considerations that cannot be separated.

Remembrance and silence

While opportunities to initiate policy on issues surrounding the legacies of the past are constantly changing, the past itself remains a disruptive and disrupting influence on transitional societies. Psychologists and sociologists have, for example, examined the related phenomena of collective trauma and transgenerational transmission of trauma. Thus, returning to the South African case, it has been noted that

> [M]emories of unresolved trauma are often perpetuated through stories told within the family and broader community. Memories continue to affect generations even when they do not directly experience the specific traumatic event. These 'received' memories shape identities as well as fuel negative perceptions and stereotypes of difference, often hindering reconciliation processes and perpetuating identities of continued victimisation.[3]

In other words, violent pasts may adversely affect younger generations who did not experience conflict directly or who may not be totally conscious or deliberately choose to ignore recent history. The idea that received wisdoms about the past colour attitudes and beliefs in the present is, in some ways, an obvious point. But it is also, paradoxically, somewhat insubstantial: history by itself cannot mould identities; rather, its prime political function is, arguably, to lend legitimacy and authority.[4] What is perhaps more consequential, though, again in subterranean ways, is the fact that trauma, politically speaking, can be constructed strategically. The psychologist Vamik Volkan, for example, speaks to this idea in his description of 'chosen trauma' – namely, the adoption of traumatic language and perception through the selection of particular historical reference points or interpretations. For Volkan, chosen trauma works itself out in a number of ways – division, victimisation, guilt, shame, humiliation, helplessness – and, he argues, it can become particularly problematic when it becomes taken for granted; that is, when historical events become mythologised and psychologised to an extent that the perception and representation of events become more important than what

actually happened.[5] The sceptic may respond that that is the post-modern condition: reality is mediated and the most persuasive rendition will win out; again, the pessimist may respond that that is so, but it is person who can proclaim her version of reality the loudest will prevail; a more sanguine observer (perhaps, even, a political realist) might reply that it all depends on how we approach the subject.

Collective or societal trauma must be differentiated from personal, individual trauma by virtue of the fact that it is imbued with particular political resonance: namely, it is involved with questions of power insofar as it determines whose voices are heard and whose are silenced, whose stories are given public acknowledgement and whose are muted. Thus, trauma is not only a silence, but, politically speaking, it is an act of silencing. This silencing can be passive and active. It can, for example take the form of uncertainty: with reference to the Balkan conflict, the political scientist Stef Jansen has claimed that obfuscation is internalised in order to abdicate historical responsibility: vagueness, he writes, 'was a crucial instrument of self-protection': it allowed for generalised accusations while, at the same time, it served to deflect 'probing questions' relating to individual responsibility.[6] Fundamentally, what this construction of trauma gives rise to is a skewered representation of our own selves:

> If our common identity is shaped by its relation to the other, to silence the voice of the other is another form of repression within ourselves ... To be so vocal about one's past might in turn become a form of screening untold memories.[7]

Lucette Valensi, writing about the Algerian War of Independence, argues that the war is not over since 'the other side' is effectively excluded from the collective memory of their erstwhile antagonists.[8] In this way, memories become reified and take on the character of ritualised narratives, becoming both totems and taboos that ensure communal and ideological orthodoxy. A similar point was made in Primo Levi's final book in which he described how

> a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallised, perfected, adorned, which installs itself in the place of the raw memory and grows at its expense.[9]

Commemoration has functioned to provide victims, groups and elites alike with a vehicle for dealing with the past. It is therefore a political act insofar as it involves a repositioning of the past in relation to the

present. As such, the politics of commemoration involve a dual process of *de-politicisation* and *re-politicisation*. Commemoration is de-politicising, firstly, because it is quintessentially a selective reading of the past: untidy narratives and unwelcome facts are conveniently written out of collective memory; historical facts and the memory of individuals are displaced, deferred and silenced. Commemoration is also an act of re-politicisation: it involves the inscription of authority in the present by reference to the past; events are framed and narratives are created to inform current understandings and to rally supporters to the cause in the present. As Rebecca Graff-McRea explains in her recent study of the resonance of the 1916 Rising throughout twentieth century nationalism, commemoration involves

> [t]he construction and contestation of *our past*: it is intricately bound to discourses of the nation, the state, identity and opposition, and thereby decrees who is to be included, excluded or marginalized from both the group and history itself.[10]

In constructing and contesting *our past*, commemoration embeds division and polarisation with an interminable impression on the way that people think about future progress and relations. If the project of commemoration is intrinsically linked with the quest of an exclusionary nationalism, the progressive centrist parties and civic society function is glaringly discernible: to establish why and who we ought to commemorate, and in what manner. The potential for displacement, deferral and, ultimately, forgetting underlines the importance of that role. Collective memory is formed on absences and silences. Bonds are created by what is judged to be important to a community and for this to take place, memory must be circumscribed. The impulse towards commemoration stands at the beginnings of that creation, and, as the American sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, explains: 'That which is not publicly known and spoken about will be socially forgotten'.[11] Rescuing silenced victims and displaced historical narratives from that process is politically difficult since it involves rowing against dominant tides; however, it should be an ethical imperative, involving as it does questions of recovering forgotten truths and making those truths visible.

Truth recovery and tolerance

During the twentieth century policymakers have grappled with issues regarding post-conflict societal transitions:[12] The German case is illus-

trative: Faced with the problem of how to move beyond civil war and revolution in Germany in 1919, Max Weber advocated adopting a responsibility to the future – raking over the past, the causes of the war, would be, he argued, detrimental to the debt that the survivors of the catastrophe owed to their children; again, on the eve of the Second World War, the Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, argued that our primary debt is to the dead, the victims of violence, and that the only sound basis of morality is to remember those who suffered and could no longer speak of their suffering, those who were rendered voiceless again by the march of progress.[13] The Nuremburg Trials instituted a bridge between Weber and Benjamin: a debt should be acknowledged and accountability be ensured in order to move forward and draw a line in the sand.[14] Regardless of the Benjaminian approach, debates about how to deal with such contentious pasts tend to coalesce around one of two fundamental ideas:

1. Unpicking the past may endanger fragile social cohesion in the present. The emblematic case in this instance is the Spanish *pacto de olvido*. The pact was not so much a commitment to forgetting, but was rather an informal understanding reached in the post-Franco era among Spain's political elites to not talk about the past in ways that would create political capital in the present.
2. Leaving questions unanswered about what took place may lead to the festering of wounds and the deepening of division. Here, the paradigmatic example is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which awarded amnesties for cases of violence and human rights abuse that were judged to be politically motivated.

Both of these approaches to the question of dealing with difficult, divided pasts, to a large extent, depend upon and proceed from an ideal of tolerance: we tolerate compromises in order to ensure cohesion; or we tolerate hurts in order to reach consensus. In so doing, they contribute to a negative conception of peace – that is, peace merely being the absence of war – and offer little in the way of a more maximalist notion where peace can be equated to beliefs in the importance of social responsibility, scrutiny and accountability, public deliberation, and popular engagement in the political process.[15] The English historian, Theodore Zeldin alludes to the limitations inherent in tolerance when he argues that 'toleration was adopted for largely negative reasons, not out of respect for other people's views ... but in despair of finding certainty. It meant closing one's eyes to what other people believed'. Toleration however, is still a vital and necessary first step:

'The ideal of toleration ... is a stepping stone. Understanding others is the great adventure that lies beyond it'.[16] In his survey of the twentieth century, which was first published in the same year as Zeldin's *Intimate History of Humanity*, Eric Hobsbawm makes a complementary point: 'what stands in the way of understanding is not only our passionate convictions, but the historical experience that has formed them. The first is easier to overcome ... it is understanding that comes hard'.[17] In other words, we will always have an opinion on violent pasts – particularly if we have lived through them or if we have been directly affected by conflict – but an understanding, that is a communication and a conversation about what occurred, might just be possible. But it involves a study of the workings of the past in the present.

Dealing with the past in Northern Ireland

Republican terror groups – most notably, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) – hold the main responsibility for conflict-related fatalities: almost 60%, compared to loyalist terrorists being responsible for almost 30%, and state forces almost 10%. Nevertheless, Provisional republicans consider themselves as victims of British oppression, and without wishing to denigrate the very real suffering and abuses perpetrated by the British state, their story is easily told and fits the decolonial paradigm: an imperial power thwarted legitimate self-determination claims, and PIRA reaction/defence followed repression. This historical narrative is not only true – the British state was responsible for sickening outrages, and more often than not, working-class Catholics bore the brunt of its ill-advised adventures. Yet, beyond that qualification, the Provisional republican narrative also represents the core conceit of the Troubles: – the malingering lie that violence was inevitable, along its surrogate falsehood that everyone bears a responsibility for what occurred. A cursory glance at the best histories of the civil rights movement or the origins of the Troubles,[18] which have appeared in recent years, easily dispels any queries about the historical inaccuracy of the Provisional republican narrative; yet, the truth of Volkan's notion that perception, when it becomes entrenched, is more important than reality, is sadly demonstrated in the fact that that narrative has saturated the thinking of governmental elites. The Consultative Group on the Past (CGP) makes this fact clear, for it was well aware that terrorist organisations' principal targets were their own communities; as its chairs, Robin Eames and Dennis Bradley, acknowledged in May 2008: 'We also met families who suffered at the hands of paramilitaries from within their own com-