



Press comment - Gail Walker in The Belfast



Jean McConville (left) who was murdered and secretly buried by the IRA in 1972

Why the ghost of murdered Jean McConville won't lie at rest

So now we know. Following the arrest and subsequent release of Gerry Adams, it has become distressingly clear that at the heart of our political process there is one unsolvable conundrum – how to square peace with justice - Gail Walker writes in The Belfast Telegraph

For too long – as witnessed by the release of those guilty of the most heinous of crimes after a few slap-on-the-wrist sentences, those nauseating 'letters of

comfort' from the police to the OTRs to let them know that it's safe to come home – we've put too much emphasis on 'peace' and not enough on 'justice'.

But it is a near-sighted decision – because the dead aren't going to go away. If anything, they clamour louder than ever that what happened to them be taken account of.

The case of Jean McConville (below) is perhaps the best-known example. After 40 years, we are still struck afresh by the horror and brutality of her abduction and murder.

Her life and death says so much about this place. Jean McConville was a Protestant woman who had the temerity to fall in love and marry a Catholic man who had served in the Army. After settling in a Protestant area of east [Belfast](#), the couple were driven out by fear – fear of their neighbours, fear of hatred, fear of the midnight knock on the door by local 'defenders of the people'.

Being working class and 'ordinary', they couldn't look towards the safety of Malone, or Stranmillis. No, they relocated to Divis Flats in Catholic west Belfast where – in an extraordinary stroke of misfortune – her husband died just months later from lung cancer. Leaving her in alien territory. Vulnerable. An outsider.

This is the simple truth behind her story. She was killed not because of any broadcasting equipment found by IRA intelligence, not because of hoary old alibis of spies and spooks. She was killed because she was different; an object of suspicion. If not one of us, she must be one of them. A Protestant.

But such primal crimes will not remain buried forever. Nor will they be subject to political compromises. It is against the natural order of things.

And that's why it seems now there is something almost supernatural about the story of Jean McConville. It is as if she has returned to haunt all of us at a time of her own choosing.

In that – yes – now iconic black and white image of her, she seems to be coming back up out of the developing fluid. Ghost-like. Like a visitation from another world.

The 50-day search for her brought forth nothing. Had she been found, then, as part of yet another deal, her killers would have been guaranteed amnesty.

No, as if at a time of her own choosing Jean McConville emerged from the ground herself, metaphorically, if not literally, waiting on the shifting of the sands to expose her corpse and the vileness of her death.

The great army of freedom fighters with their grand self-given titles, and P O'Neill-signed Press releases, their bombastic rhetoric of dying for the cause, was nothing better than this: the kidnapping and murder of a poor, helpless mother-of-10, dragged out of the bath and away from her children.

As loudly as Jean's story cries out to heaven, we should remind ourselves that hers is not the only one. There are hundreds of Jean McConvilles, their cases unsolved, their murderers never brought to account. They are the people shot in the back off-duty, the shoppers blown to pieces, the Catholics murdered for being Catholics. Or alleged informers. The victims of happenstance.

Imagine if you met them all, walking along the street, a march of the dead, silently mouthing at you: who, what and why? How could you forget?

But, of course, they are not forgotten. They live on in the memories of their loved ones. And they rebuke our current 'peace process' which – it's increasingly clear – considers them little more than an embarrassment.

The victims have received no justice, no truth commissions and barely any acknowledgement from our institutions.

No wonder the ghosts are restless. Politicians hate metaphysics because what is beyond their eyes can't be controlled, can't be bought off. Yet it is concepts like justice, confession and contrition that lie at the heart of any peace process, not the calculator politics of D'Hondt and the cute legalese of human rights legislation.

It was a truth recognised, ironically, by Patrick Pearse: "Ghosts are troublesome things ... There is only one way to appease a ghost. You must do the thing it asks you. The ghosts of a nation sometimes ask very big things; and they must be appeased, whatever the cost."

Uttered in a different time and in a different place, but Jean McConville is one of those nigh-on countless ghosts of our time and our place.

Ghosts are indeed troublesome things.

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/gail-walker/why-the-ghost-of-murdered-jean-mcconville-wont-lie-at-rest-30245348.html>