

## BOOKS

# How Conflicts End—And Who Can End Them

A new book about the Troubles in Northern Ireland is a detective story about an unsolved murder. It's also an examination of the cost of achieving peace.

DAVID A. GRAHAM MAR 3, 2019

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DOUBLEDAY

## **Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland**

BY PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE DOUBLEDAY

Nearly 4,000 people were killed in the Troubles in Northern Ireland between the late 1960s and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, as violent tensions flared between mostly Catholic republicans, who sought unification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland, and a mix of Protestant paramilitaries, police, and British army forces arrayed against them. People died in shootings and riots and bombings. They were killed in internecine struggles, or while guarding military posts, or while simply going about their daily lives in Belfast.

But a small number, fewer than 20, were “disappeared,” a technique more

associated with right-wing South American juntas than with Northern Irish guerrillas. One night in December 1972, masked militants entered a flat in Belfast and abducted Jean McConville, a recently widowed mother of 10. The kidnappers told the children she'd be back soon, but McConville was never seen again. Her body was not found until 2003, and her murder has never been officially solved.

Patrick Radden Keefe's new book, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*, presents itself as a detective story: a quest to figure out who killed McConville and why. Keefe is accomplished at unraveling old crimes—as he did with “A Loaded Gun,” his breathtaking 2013 *New Yorker* article about a mass shooter—and he had an unusual cache of evidence to work with. After the Good Friday Agreement, Boston College created an archive of oral histories of the conflict, which was intended to be sealed until the interviewees were dead. Two of the interviews, with the former Irish Republican Army members Brendan Hughes and Dolours Price, discussed the murder in detail. Keefe was able to work from transcripts of interviews with both Hughes and Price, who had died by the time he wrote the book.

Keefe creates a persuasive account, writing that Hughes ordered McConville's arrest on the grounds that she was a tout, or informer, a crime the IRA punished by death. (The evidence that she was an informer is vague and dubious at best.) Price drove her over the border into the Republic of Ireland. Three IRA members, including Price, took turns firing a gun loaded with two blanks and one bullet, so that none of them would know until he or she pulled the trigger who would be the killer. Once McConville was dead, she was secretly buried. (Keefe comes to an intriguing conclusion about who fired the fatal shot, though his case is necessarily circumstantial.)

While the murder appalls, McConville herself seems to vanish before the reader's eyes. She was just 38 when she was killed, and her life is nearly as opaque as her death. Only one photograph of her remains in her children's possession, and some of them were too young when she died to have much memory of her. Though Keefe notes how her disappearance wreaked havoc on her children's lives, that's not his focus. Instead, *Say Nothing* is about how conflicts end, and who can end them. It is also an indictment of Gerry Adams, the republican politician who helped negotiate

the Good Friday Agreement. Keefe alleges that he is the man who decided that McConville should be disappeared.

This story has no heroes, just more and less complicated villains. That mirrors the Troubles, which avoid easy binaries. Whether one sympathizes with Protestant unionists or Catholic republicans, both sides committed horrific abuses, and while Keefe focuses on the IRA, he notes that it is not for lack of atrocities by unionist paramilitaries, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, or the British military. Even McConville's life shows how stubbornly the conflict resisted simple categorization. She was born to a Protestant family but married a Catholic who was a soldier in the British army. When she was abducted, it was from her apartment in a Catholic neighborhood in Belfast.

Adams continues to deny that he was a member of the IRA, much less involved in McConville's murder. But through exhaustive research, new interviews, and especially the Boston College transcripts, Keefe vividly reconstructs the foxhole bonds among IRA members and Adams's role in the organization's operations, showing why his former comrades were so stung by his abandonment of the armed struggle in favor of politics—and why his claims of innocence ring false.

Price, Hughes, and Adams worked closely together in the early 1970s as members of the Provisional IRA, a breakaway faction of the moribund old Irish Republican Army that embraced violence and disdained electoral politics. Price joined the Provos after being beaten by unionist thugs during a nonviolent 1969 march. Hughes, a daring tactician, was her commanding officer. But, Keefe writes, the wily Adams was the architect of the IRA's bloody strategy. All three were imprisoned in 1973: Price for her role in a deadly bombing in London, and Hughes and Adams after being arrested together in Belfast and held without trial.

Adams was freed in 1977, Price (suffering from anorexia developed during a hunger strike) in 1981. When Hughes was released, in 1986, he lived at Adams's house while he got back on his feet. By that time, Keefe notes, Adams had become convinced that independence couldn't be won through armed struggle alone. Under his new strategy, the IRA would pursue power “with a ballot paper in one hand and an Armalite [rifle] in the other.” In 1983, Adams was elected president of

Sinn Féin, the IRA's political wing, and a member of the British Parliament.

His transformation would become key to peace in Northern Ireland. By deciding to enter politics, Adams created a future in which he could negotiate the 1998 peace agreement, but in the immediate term, it was a risky maneuver that placed him in a perilous position. He was still a target for the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and now also risked retaliation from angry Provos who had killed alleged traitors like McConville with little hesitation. Adams's solution was to insist that he was never a member of the IRA. This was plainly ridiculous: The press had long called him a leader within the organization, he'd appeared at IRA funerals in the group's signature black beret, and he had written a pseudonymous piece for the Sinn Féin newspaper, *Republican News*, that proclaimed, "Rightly or wrongly, I am an IRA volunteer," and defended violence as a tactic. Adam's denial of IRA membership was meant to be taken literally, but not seriously—a fiction to protect himself from prosecution while winking at his allies. At a 1995 event, a man shouted, "Bring back the IRA!" and Adams replied, grinning, "They haven't gone away, you know."

Among the alienated former cohorts were Hughes and Price, whom Keefe brings back to life with the help of the Boston College interviews. Both were critical of Adams publicly, but they were especially harsh in the oral histories. Though neither of them was still involved in violence, they hadn't denounced it as a tactic, and they resented the handover of weapons under the Good Friday Agreement as a surrender. Price and Hughes had paid dearly for the crimes they said they committed in the IRA's name—in prison time and physical ailments, but also in haunted consciences. At the time, they had viewed the killings as regrettable parts of a struggle for freedom. Now Adams had nullified the cause while denying his own role. Hughes said that while he once would have taken a bullet for Adams, he now wanted to put one in him. Except that, "as everything turned out," Hughes said, "not one death was worth it."

That included McConville, in whose murder both Hughes and Price implicated Adams. Hughes said he'd supported killing McConville, but Adams had ordered, over Hughes's objections, that she also be disappeared. Price told another interviewer, who provided the unpublished transcript to Keefe, that Adams had given the order to kill McConville, and that the squad that killed her reported back

to him afterward. When the Boston College project became publicly known, Northern Irish prosecutors subpoenaed the archive and obtained them. Adams was arrested for McConville's murder in 2014, but was later released and never charged.

Adams refused to talk to Keefe and has disclaimed all responsibility for the killing, but Keefe compiles a compelling brief to show that he was closely involved in it and in many other episodes. While Adams's turn to politics seems sincere, a central argument of *Say Nothing* is that his claims of ignorance and detached condemnations of Provos violence make him a hypocrite who's been laundered into an elder statesman with a quirky, grandfatherly Twitter feed. Yet while Hughes and Price seemed to wrestle more honestly with their actions, their fidelity to indefinite armed struggle for unification is also indefensible. The IRA had waged a war for decades and came no closer to dislodging the British from Northern Ireland. How many years, and how many deaths, would it have taken to win?

In part because of his denials, Adams was uniquely positioned to make peace when the moment arrived. Widely known as a leader of the Provos, he had the credibility to make political compromises; because he repudiated that past, he had entree into politics. That combination allowed him to join the list of imperfect leaders who have brokered momentous peace agreements. *Say Nothing* succeeds because it presents an extensive ledger of evidence against Adams, without reducing him to flat caricature. Keefe shows how important Adams's pragmatism was to creating the fragile, and now threatened, peace in North Ireland, but doesn't downplay his moral bankruptcy. Keefe recalls that there was once speculation that Adams might win the Nobel Peace Prize. Though he didn't, Adams would have been at home alongside winners such as Yasser Arafat, F. W. de Klerk, and Henry Kissinger, who were able to strike deals not in spite of but because of their deep flaws.

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