



Gerry Adams:

Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland

Review by Liz O'Donnell

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This week, in spite of so much expectation, we have had yet another false dawn in the peace process. The arrival of the cast of players in front of No. 10, Castle Buildings or at Hillsborough has become a tele-visual action replay over the last five years. George Mitchell was right when he warned us that implementing the Agreement would be far tougher than negotiating it. But maybe at last we are reaching end game when, to quote Seamus Heaney “the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up and Hope and History rhyme”.

There are many books on the Irish Peace Process. However, this personal account by Gerry Adams is an essential addition. If you are seeking a balanced analysis, look elsewhere. This book is understandably selective, indeed self-serving. Adams himself has, rightly, a considerable sense of his own place in history. His central credo is that “the people of Ireland have a right to be free of the British connection. In the absence of any alternative, armed actions represent a necessary form of struggle against the British Administration and in pursuance of national independence”. But he also believes that “a successful peace process means bringing an end to physical force republicanism”. The tension between these two positions runs through recent history. But the book is less than open in its exploration of that tension.

Adams’s competence as a writer is clear in the heartfelt introduction. The book is very thorough. Throughout, Adams had the benefit of excellent note-taking by a special Sinn Féin team, but the detail is dense and at time wearisome. Unsurprisingly, light moments are few and far between. But there are two involving Martin McGuinness in London – one after

the Lancaster House talks in 1998, when he gave an impromptu speech at Speakers' Corner to startled onlookers.

Throughout this book Adams remains on message. Of course there is much truth in the republican version of history – but the validity of other perspectives is not granted. Adams is derisive about the flabbiness of the Irish 'establishment' on the national question. Everything is viewed through the prism of republican ideology.

This book is mostly about an unfolding political strategy, its players, its credo, its initiatives and disappointments. The terrible atrocities spanning 25 years are mentioned, but there is little remorse, just a steely and sad acceptance that there will be victims in all struggles.

It at times a self absorbed account. There is no understanding by Adams of the risks posed to democracy by the peace process. From the Irish Government's perspective it was always high risk. Fundamental principles were being called into question. However, the earlier policies of exclusion and censorship had not worked. Nor had building from the centre out. Perhaps inclusive dialogue could foster an unstoppable benign dynamic. This strategy necessarily required the development of a nationalist consensus involving the Irish Government, Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

Adams certainly enjoys a global audience. At times of impatience with the Irish "establishment", he reached out to North America and South Africa for affirmation. Friends of Sinn Féin and other Irish American groups were always more receptive to the revolutionary rhetoric. They, of course, were not picking up the bodies. This Irish American outreach was to be vital not only for fundraising but also for political influence, which could be called upon when the time was right.

You will search hard to find a laudatory or sympathetic profile of any one elected Irish political figure. In these pages Clinton and Mandela loom large. John Hume's and Fr. Alec Reid's contribution receive due acknowledgement. Otherwise, there is no hint of a personal relationship apart from family and party colleagues.

Like it or not the peace process has delivered electoral success to Sinn Féin.

All the stamina and ruthlessness required to sustain the armed struggle has been transferred into the political strategy. Mark Durkan memorably referred to “punishment meetings” with Sinn Féin. As negotiators they are insatiable. As soon as one list of grievances is dealt with, they produce another. They appear to have no other life but the struggle.

Maybe the most successful part of the book is Adam’s description of the end game leading to the Good Friday Agreement—the texts, tedium, fatigue, uncertainty, the hanging around. His disciplined Sinn Féin delegation taking turns to sleep on a camp bed, sharing the responsibility for drafting and putting forward propositions through the long days and nights. I remember well the heady mix of stupor and adrenalin. Adams recalls Senator Mitchell’s exasperation in those final hours, likening it to the “Gate Fever” of Long Kesh prisoners close to release. He tells of Mo being sidelined and of telephoning Clinton and waking him up in the White House. Adams also claims, which is strongly disputed, that he shook the Taoiseach’s hand on the inclusion of Garda McCabe’s killers in the prisoner release programme.

For my part I recall walking up with David Andrews to Stormont having heard Tony Blair say on radio that he felt the “hand of history on his back”. I joked with David that it could well be “the boot of history up the - you know what!” None of us negotiators joined in the euphoria. We knew the difficulties ahead, of translating the text into reality. So it has turned out.

Adams provides a useful Epilogue to bring the story bang up to April 2003. And the TV images continue, of Adams talking of the ‘collective responsibility to move forward’. The language of the peace process is unique. Those who use it know the code. Ordinary citizens, however have long since glazed over and who can blame them? There have been too many false dawns. For many, the soap opera has gone on too long; the cast of players too predictable.

But with this week’s real advances and a remarkable maturing of the Trimble/Adams relationship, we may be nearer than ever to an enduring peace. The thorny problem of

unionist mistrust is only beginning to be addressed by republicans. But massive change has taken place. Things are better “in the round” as Mo would say.

If making war brings out the worst in people, I found that making peace brought out the best. The participants I worked with on all sides, mindful of the price of failure, transcended themselves to achieve a sort of greatness. This book may fail to acknowledge the greatness of others but it is an important insight into the major republican figure of our time.