

## Belfast Days: A 1972 Teenage Diary

1972 - it was the worst year of the Troubles. Beginning with Bloody Sunday in Derry, when 13 civil rights marchers were shot dead by the Parachute Regiment, and ending with bomb attacks in Dublin which killed two bus conductors shortly before Christmas. In between, some 480 people lost their lives to Northern Ireland's violence that year.

Eimear O'Callaghan, a former BBC news editor who has also worked with RTÉ and the Irish News, was 16 at the time, an ordinary girl growing up in Catholic West Belfast, working towards her A-Levels, filling out application forms for university.

Recently, she unearthed a copy of her teenage diary from the time. Nothing further from the innocent world of Adrian Mole could be imagined. Now she's published it, interspersed with further background information of what was happening at the time and some thoughts on the period 40 years on.

The juxtaposition of ordinary school life with horrific events not far from her own door is shocking. "Did 7 hours revision tonight for Applied Maths," reads the entry for Wednesday, February 9. "I feel as sick as anything. I'm dreading these Maths, sure I won't do well. 3 nail-bomb explosions tonight, Falls Road." Another, from Saturday, March 25: "Boy (17) shot dead in Ballymurphy last night. Watched the Eurovision Song Contest - Ireland came second LAST!" (Actually 15th out of 18th).

The snippets of normal Belfast life will be immediately authentic to anyone who grew up in the city; the names and places ring unerringly true; the details of the litany of killings equally familiar to anyone who watched the news at the time. There are funerals nearly every day. On the morning of the Abercorn restaurant bombing in March, in which two young women lost their lives, O'Callaghan is in town for a job interview, otherwise, she too might have been caught up in the blast. The matter of factness with which the author relates these extraordinary events is what gives Belfast Days its power. There's a simplicity about it which recalls a much younger child rather than a teenager, but then 16 wasn't such a sophisticated age back then. She also deserves credit for not sanitising her past self with the benefit of hindsight.

As someone who grew up in the same sort of environment, this reviewer can vouch for the fact that O'Callaghan absolutely captures the terror which loyalist paramilitaries invoked in Catholic communities and the unswaying conviction

that the British were in the wrong, and that Republicans, though they might commit appalling acts of their own, were still essentially on the side of the angels.

"Murderers!" she writes after Bloody Friday, the series of IRA bombings in Belfast in July which killed nine people; but the outrage is soon wiped away by another loyalist sectarian murder, and 10 days later she records without comment the IRA's fraudulent disclaimer of responsibility for the Claudy bombing, which killed an eight-year-old girl and eight other innocent victims.

This is what makes the teenage diary so compelling and alive; the way in which it ties together the unrelenting awfulness of events and the correspondingly awful normality of it all; the regular round of homework and Top of the Pops and power cuts and Mass and watching the news.

But the present day additions don't really add anything to the whole, and O'Callaghan, who left the BBC in 2010 to set up her own communications consultancy, doesn't address the gaps in the story until an all-too-brief epilogue. "Fear, distrust, and the belief that the security forces were aggressors rather than protectors - that my community was on its own - blinded me to much of the suffering the IRA was inflicting on the unionist community," she now realises.

She seems a little apologetic, even embarrassed, about that, but she shouldn't be. That's how it was. When members of one's own community, those to whom a name and face could be put, were being brutally killed, it did desensitise one to suffering on the "other" side.

Exploring those feelings, teasing them out, as the narrative went along, rather than partitioning them off into a cursory afterword, would have made for a deeper book. For all that, Belfast Days remains essential reading for anyone who wants to understand what it was like for ordinary families as they struggled to get through a nightmare, not of their making.