At the 2007 Cúirt International Festival of Literature in Galway, playwright Gary Mitchell attacked the media for reporting an “agreed truth” not the “real truth” about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. He is the latest in a long line to shoot the messenger. His remarks were, and remain, a disappointment but come as no surprise to weary journalists who had to climb a steep learning curve during one of the most traumatic periods in the history of these islands, and then had the role of persuaders thrust upon them in the long struggle to find a peaceful settlement. Even the smallest truth was hard to find in the fog of war and it will be many years yet before we know the whole truth, because the Irish and British governments at first attempted to censor coverage to withhold the “oxygen of publicity” from armed groups, before then joining the propaganda game. Reporters and analysts did their best to present an accurate account of events and a balance of opinions despite dirty tricks employed by all participants. Most of the journalists recognised they were prisoners of history and verifiable truth was a casualty of conflict.

It was broadcasting which brought the “truth” about life under a Stormont regime to the attention of the world. Television footage of a beating meted out by police officers to civil rights protestors, taken by RTÉ in 1968, gave the issue an international profile. But in the electronic newsrooms there was a struggle for the Holy Grail of impartiality that often caused friction among journalists. Television and radio reporters sought to present a lofty objectivity, but the BBC offended nationalists and Unionists alike by referring to “Londonderry” in the first reference and “Derry” thereafter. Martin Bell has confessed that in 1969 he and his colleagues “made fools of ourselves” when persuaded to use the term “refugees” instead of “fleeing Catholics” because it was BBC style and policy to “calm things...
The entire board of RTÉ was dismissed by the Irish government in 1972 for permitting a broadcast featuring an IRA spokesman. In 1981 Mary McAleese, now Ireland’s President but then an RTÉ journalist, was branded an IRA sympathiser by some colleagues because of her open passion for a balanced view of northern republicans instead of the narrow wisdom of the political establishment in 1981.

Most newspapers refused to sit on the fence, often courageously. The Republic’s largest selling daily, the Irish Independent, was consistent in its condemnation of the IRA, while Britain’s Daily Mirror called for “Troops out” and resettlement grants for Unionists. The offices of the Independent, Mirror and the head offices of all three local dailies – the Irish News, the News Letter and the Belfast Telegraph – were damaged by bomb blasts. The News Letter, the daily paper of Unionists, also paid a commercial price for supporting the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The world’s oldest English-language daily newspaper lost the support of many in the Unionist party establishment, and thousands of its readers, for backing power sharing before decommissioning had taken place.

**Attacked by a nun**

Many visiting reporters have written tales of daring and danger about their experiences. They saw the worst – street violence, shootings, bombings and funerals – and interviewed killers and their victims. Yet most can look back with understanding and fond memories. Kate Adie and her camera team once pursued a wounded IRA gunman to a hospital in Monaghan, where, she later recounted, they were attacked by a nun. Adie was among the first at the scene of a loyalist shooting, where she found a small boy standing over the body of his murdered father. Yet in her autobiography, The Kindness of Strangers, the BBC’s chief news correspondent speaks warmly of the people she met: “I loved Northern Ireland. In the midst of the mayhem there was always real humanity.”

John Sergeant covered his first shooting and escaped his first explosion in Belfast in 1971. Fellow reporter John Simpson sparked a bomb alert in Derry when he left a “suspicious package” of books on the roof of his car. Later the car and the two reporters were hijacked in the Bogside. In his book, Give Me Ten Seconds, Sergeant, then ITN’s political editor, wrote: “My memories tend to be of companionship mixed with tension and excitement and it was in Belfast that I came of age as reporter.” Simpson became the BBC’s Dublin
correspondent in 1972, was regularly threatened by factions within republicanism, and was on the streets in 1974 when loyalist bombs killed 30 people. Yet the BBC’s world affairs editor now lives in the city. In his book, *Strange Places, Questionable People*, he recalls: “My time in Ireland was the making of my professional career. I came to love Belfast and sympathise deeply with its different groups of inhabitants.” Martin Bell, who gave up journalism for politics in 1997 and is now an ambassador for the United Nations Children’s Fund, crawled through the window of a lavatory in Limavady to escape from a loyalist mob in 1974, but his frequent visits gave him valuable experience and a taste for Bushmills whiskey. In his biography, *In Harm’s Way*, he says: “Not for nothing does the BBC give its reporters their on-the-job training in Northern Ireland.”

On Michael Buerk’s first visit a woman threw a shovelful of dog shit over him. He was shot at by an IRA sniper, and a rubber bullet missed him by inches on the Falls Road. Yet the television presenter’s book, *The Road Taken*, looks back with humour on late-night poker sessions in the Wellington Park Hotel, and the discovery of a fellow BBC employee in the bath at the Europa Hotel with two Penthouse “pets”. “I have found the most violent parts of the world often seem to contain lots of kind, friendly and hospitable people. It’s true of Northern Ireland,” recalls Buerk.

Feargal Keane was a reporter for Radio Telefis Eireann when he was first sent north. He was called “Fenian scum” in loyalist areas and “a Free State sell-out” in nationalist districts, but made many good friends from all factions. In his memoir, *All of These People*, the BBC’s special correspondent wrote: “It was a place of gifts and when I eventually left Belfast it would be a bitter wrench in a way I could never have foreseen.” Keane was a rarity in that he chose to live in Northern Ireland. When their jobs were done, most visiting reporters retired to a comfortable hotel room or were flown home to the comfort and security of friends and loved ones. They knew Northern Ireland was a war zone where they could earn their spurs and then escape. The local journalists had no such luxury.

None has captured the dilemma of those who lived and worked there as honestly as Malachi O’Doherty. He began his career as a junior reporter at the height of the Troubles in 1972. “I could see the boys of the IRA pass my living-room window with their guns, presumably going to a dump just yards away. I could hardly have exposed them any more than they were exposing themselves. And I had little faith that if I did bring the police and the Army into the area to raid safe-houses and dumps they would not have arrested or
killed innocents at the same time.” O’Doherty left Ireland to escape the
danger and the pressure. Many who remained paid a heavy price. Peter
Somerset of the BBC and Cyril Cain of the Daily Mirror were injured by
baton rounds fired by the security forces. Jim Campbell survived a loyalist
gun attack. His Sunday World colleague Martin O’Hagan was shot dead and no
one was convicted of the crime. Many reporters still live with threats. In
Ireland there is a tradition of moving from “guns to government”, using the
media to communicate “truth”.

Eamonn De Valera fought in the 1916 Rising and founded the Irish Press in
1931 to further his political ambitions and push forward the transition to a
republic, which was finally declared in 1948. Senior figures in the Unionist
press, some of them involved in gun-running in 1914, were rewarded for their
roles after the 1921 election that secured partition and a parliament at
Stormont. Trevor Henderson at the News Letter and Robert Baird at the
Belfast Telegraph received knighthoods. Samuel Cunningham of the now
defunct Northern Whig was given a seat in the Northern Ireland Senate.
Today’s new First Minister Ian Paisley and Deputy First Minister Martin
McGuinness owe their new-found positions of power to the tradition in
these islands of a diverse and free news media – senior republicans and
loyalists recognised the power of publicity early in the conflict and learned to
play the “truth game” as part of a wider strategy.

Perfect publicity machine

Republicans split over media tactics early in the conflict. The “officials”,
as opposed to the “provisionals”, moved into politics and media in the mid-
1960s, but the provisionals’ media campaign, which saw hunger striker
Bobby Sands elected to Westminster in 1981, was the turning point. By 2005
Sinn Fein had perfected a publicity machine that included a new national
newspaper, Daily Ireland. It survived long enough to play a role in putting the
party into government in Northern Ireland and a cabinet post within reach in
the Republic. Ian Paisley launched his Protestant Telegraph in 1966 to oppose
liberal commentary in the established Unionist press, and at the height of
the Troubles paramilitaries, including the Ulster Volunteer Force, openly
courted journalists in an attempt to secure legitimacy. David Ervine secured
an Assembly seat for the political wing of the UVF before his untimely death
in this year.

Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern were latecomers to the media game, but
showed themselves to be skilled players when they knew the time was right.
They persuaded all major media organisations in Britain and Ireland, openly or discreetly, to endorse the Good Friday Agreement before it was put to referenda, even though there was considerable opposition among Unionists. With the media “on-message”, it was merely a matter of time before there emerged a settlement the two leaders could trumpet to the world.

The experiences of journalists in Northern Ireland confirm what Sir Walter Scott observed when he visited in 1825: “I never saw a richer country, or, to speak my mind, a finer people; the worst of them is the bitter and envenomed dislike which they have to each other. Their factions have been so long envenomed, and they have such narrow ground to do their battle in, that they are like people fighting with daggers in a hogshead.” Peace, power-sharing and economic progress have created a new and very different challenge for the media. The new hogshead is the Northern Ireland Assembly – a chamber without a formal opposition where decisions are made by a system of cosy agreement, not vigorous debate. It will require considerable scrutiny if the taxpayers of Britain and Ireland are to see value for money.

When Northern Ireland last had devolved government, the Stormont press pack had diversity and hunger. Every major media company on both sides of the border, from the republican Irish Press to the Unionist News Letter, employed experienced staff to report and analyse the decision-making. Today’s press pack is much smaller and runs the risk of becoming spoon-fed, greatly outnumbered as it is by government press officers and party lobbyists. Editors on both sides of the border and the Irish Sea appear content to take the bulk of coverage from an over-stretched Press Association.

But that is now and then was then, and recognition of the contribution to peace made by the media and their journalists in Northern Ireland is long overdue. The most fitting tribute would be vigorous, daily reporting of the Assembly – if truth is the first casualty of war, proper scrutiny must not become the first casualty of peace. Certainly, it is time to stop shooting the messenger.

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