

Chapter 2 ~ An Irish View of Conflict



I have always believed that there are defining influences in our lives which shape the way we respond to and deal with conflict. I often say that it is for others to judge how I deal with conflict, but I at least can say that I know what conflict is, having lived most of my life in Northern Ireland. Let me reminisce.

In many respects, Ireland is one of the world's great conundrums. Its beauty is renowned, fabled and recorded in songs and poetry. It also happens to be, in my opinion, the most popular country on earth. I am often challenged by those who want to know how I can say that. My answer is always the same. I do not think there is a corner of the earth where an Irishman can go and not be welcome. I cannot think of another country that could make that claim. Yet, on an island as small as Ireland, we have managed to traverse the last century with very few periods in which there was no conflict. And too often that conflict was violent. There was a civil war, and the last thirty years were focused on what has become known as 'the troubles,' an understatement if ever there were one.

Volumes have been written about the reasons for this conflict. It was the lot of many journalists to breeze into Belfast throughout that period and very often to write articles about those pesky Irish who seemingly could get on well with the rest of the world but not with each other. It is true. I won't

presume to give yet another opinion for this. Suffice it to say that I have lived through it and have a very interesting perspective of it.

From 1968 to 1971, I lived and worked in England, just outside London in Buckinghamshire. If you had to leave Ireland, Bucks was as good a place as any to go. With great rural splendor and old-world charm, it was not unlike many parts of Ireland. I had wanted to work away from Ireland for a period of time because I had often heard it said that having a 'stay-at-home attitude' made one parochial in outlook. I was sufficiently convinced by that idea to want to try it out following the completion of my law studies.

My work experience in England began in the world of insurance. I gained a remarkable experience as part of an organization which, at the time, was the first major insurance company in the United Kingdom to become computerized. As an aside, the computer system was housed on a complete floor of one building, the temperature was controlled, and a security pass was needed to even get to look at the thing. Curiously, the processing power of that mainframe computer then was probably no more than that of my laptop, which I now use to help produce these garbled thoughts.

It was an interesting period of my life for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that I was living reasonably close to my older brother, Vincent Hanna. Vincent, although a qualified attorney, had chosen a path of journalism and was quickly making a name for himself as one of the most significant political journalists in British television. As adult brothers, we grew closer than we had ever been as children. We shared many passions, not the least of which was a love of sports. Through him, I met John Lovesey, who at that time was the Sports Editor of the *Sunday Times*, one of the most famous newspapers in the world. Like most young men at the time, I was intrigued by journalism and could never quite understand how

newspapers managed to pull everything together so amazingly quickly for the public's consumption the following day.

In truth, I am still mesmerized by the editorial skills of people like John. He was such an interesting man that, when I first met him, he seemed as keen to know about my chosen profession as I was about his. As we exchanged details, I discovered that he had a pending insurance claim against the company for which I worked. He told me he was disgruntled by the way it was being handled, and I undertook to look into it for him as soon as I returned to my office. I was true to my word, and the very next morning I located his file and discovered that he had every right to be disgruntled. Fortunately, at that time I had the authority to resolve the issue instantly and ordered a check in settlement of his claim. In reality, from recollection, it was an insignificant amount. I called to tell him that I had resolved the matter, and he was extremely grateful. He invited me to lunch the following week, and that, for me, became the start of a huge adventure.

When I arrived at the *Sunday Times*, John was the perfect host. He showed me around and introduced me to personalities whose writing I had long admired. I was like a child in a toyshop. Lunch was even better as several of his columnists joined us, and we sat for a few hours dissecting the previous weekend's sporting events and how the paper had reflected them. It was quite magical.

I must have conveyed sufficient enthusiasm and knowledge to suggest that I might be able to do this job because a few days later I received by mail a request that I go to Swindon the following Saturday and file a report for the *Sunday Times* on the soccer match of Swindon Town against Leyton Orient. The instruction said, "File five hundred words before four-forty five." How

was that possible? The game didn't end until four-forty. At first, I assumed it was a joke, probably inspired by my big brother. But the accompanying first class ticket on British rail convinced me that I was about to become a journalist. I went to Swindon the following Saturday, filed my five hundred words and began a period of my life which was, quite simply, wonderful. Thereafter, almost every Saturday, I wrote on sports for the *Sunday Times* until I returned to my native Belfast three years later in 1971. I never took the privilege for granted. How could I? There I was on Saturday afternoons, sitting in a series of press boxes that covered the length and breadth of England, alongside childhood heroes such as Dennis Compton, one of the great cricket and soccer legends, and the incomparable Danny Blanchflower from my native Belfast who, as a soccer player, was the cream on the top of the milk. He captained Northern Ireland, one of the smallest soccer-playing nations in the world, to the finals of the World Cup in Sweden in 1956. To this day, I quote him in class. At a press conference, before facing the might of Sweden, he was asked by a journalist if Northern Ireland had a game plan. He looked studiously at the questioner and replied thoughtfully, "Of course, we intend to get our retaliation in first."

Danny, like many sporting legends, hung up his boots in favor of the pen and followed his exceptional playing career with a distinguished journalistic career. It was such a thrill for me to even sit close to such legends of sports and journalism.

I returned to Belfast in June of 1971, having acquired some wonderful experiences both within the legal profession and the journalistic world. And, most memorably, I had acquired a beautiful new daughter. Susie was born on June 6, 1970. I felt complete. Returning home was exciting, but there was trepidation. The troubles were escalating, but even then, people

indulged their Irish optimism by constantly reminding themselves that the worst must be over because it couldn't be any worse than this. How wrong we all were.

I joined my father's law firm, which had moved to a prestigious office location in downtown Belfast at 81 Victoria Street. It was a corner office site at the intersection of Victoria Street and Ann Street, a busy thoroughfare. It had an open floor plan with an exterior that was mostly glass, offering us a view down Ann Street to the river Lagan and beyond to the Belfast shipyard. Three weeks later, it was blown to bits. This was the reality of Belfast. At the time my father had taken out the lease there were no troubles, and, as he said, there seemed to be a sense of security in sharing a building with the British Royal Air Force Recruiting Office and Fleet Street's Daily Express. How wrong he was, as they became prime targets. The sad point for us was that we occupied the complete first floor of the building, whereas the others were on the third floor. Hence, our offices were completely destroyed while the offices above had only their windows broken.

Little did I realize at that time that I was acquiring an experience and understanding of conflict and its reasons. I saw my role as easing my father's burden and getting the law practice back into operation as quickly as possible. We did it within two months, and on a Saturday morning in September of 1971, I, along with my staff, moved the final pieces of paper and furniture back into place, ready for re-commencement of business on the following Monday morning. It was a job well done.

That afternoon I went to Newtownards where I was doing a radio report on a soccer game for the BBC. During the game I was getting a live audio feed from the studios in Belfast. There was a newsflash; there had been yet

another explosion. I chilled. My office was blown to bits again. I simply don't have the words to describe that feeling, or indeed the aftermath, when I learned that the bomb that exploded had been one of two. The first one had failed to detonate. The timer on it showed that it had been set to go off that morning when my staff and I were putting the final touches on our restored office

This time the damage was so intense that the building had to be evacuated, and we temporarily relocated within a security gated area in the center of Belfast. We stayed there for eighteen months while our office was repaired and rebuilt, and then we returned to it. Once again, it was blown to bits. This time, we gave up and relocated.

If that sounds a bit dramatic, it was. But that drama was nothing by comparison to the tragedy that followed throughout the following years. By this time, I was broadcasting for the BBC, presenting the early morning current affairs radio program. My average day started at 5:00 a.m. I went to the studios, did interviews, presented the program, signed off, had my breakfast, and at 9:00 a.m. went to my office. This continued until 1975 when I was offered a weekly television program with the local commercial television station, Ulster Television. The year 1974 was one of the most remarkable in modern Irish history. It was the year of the famed Ulster Worker's Council Strike where loyalist para-militaries brought down a government. We all assured each other that it couldn't get any worse. Wrong again.

It was a fascinating time for journalism when all of the major media outlets in the world established bases in Belfast, and journalists flew in and established homes as they reported the events which dominated television

screens for the next twenty-five years. I met wonderful people, and I learned a lot. One friend with whom I shared stories and collaborated was Anne Robinson whose name was to later become a household word the world over for her appearances in the television program, 'The Weakest Link.'

In 1975, I began my television career hosting a program for Ulster Television called, 'What's It All About.' It was a studio-based, talking heads format and covered just about anything from politics to religion and points beyond. I worked with a man named Andy Crockart who directed my programs and who was an absolute joy to work with. Together we chalked up many remarkable experiences during which I met many remarkable people. Upon reflection, perhaps my greatest disappointment was that on a week I was on holiday, I missed the opportunity of interviewing Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

There were many other people -- some controversial, all interesting -- who sat under the studio lights with me and shared their views and experiences. I interviewed Chuck Colson, who was President Nixon's hatchet man during his presidency and who eventually served jail time for his involvement with Watergate. Colson was a lawyer who, something like a Phoenix rising from the ashes, re-climbed the success ladder by finding religion when in prison. He had written a book and was touring to promote it when he agreed to appear with me on television for a half-hour interview. Before the program, in the Green Room, I told him that the Northern Irish public was a cynical bunch so the interview might just be tough. It turned out to be more like a game of chess where I wanted to talk about the real stuff while he wanted to talk about the new stuff. At the end of the program, on-screen he signed a copy of his book for me, which I still have today. He paid me the compliment

of telling me that it was the toughest interview he had ever faced. I enjoyed Chuck, but I suspect he said the same thing to most interviewers.

One of the most memorable interviews I conducted at that time was with a man named Colonel Al Warden. I found him to be absolutely fascinating and akin to Superman. He was the Command Module Pilot of Apollo 15; in other words, the guy who flew alone around the moon while his buddies did the rest. I was quite in awe of his ability, his faith in the equipment, and his bravery. Alongside him, I felt inadequate.

As I write these words, I am struck by the fact that I could ramble on with reminiscence of those days and the events in Northern Ireland during that time. However, it is important that nothing I say should be construed as glamorous. They were tough times -- heartbreaking. And there isn't an individual who lived in Northern Ireland through that period who could not tell you story after story of tragedy and despair.

In 1977, following the death of Cardinal William Conway, a controversial cleric named Monsignor Thomas O'Fiach (pronounced Fee) was appointed Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland. He was controversial because his background was Republican, he came from County Armagh, he was a fluent Irish speaker and a scholar. He was much maligned and distrusted by the Protestant population of Northern Ireland, but as I got to know him and conducted many television programs with him, I saw a different side of him. I saw a man who loved his country and was distressed by the hatred that divided it. It was inevitable, being the Irish Primate, that he would be honored by the Pope, and in 1979, he became Cardinal Thomas O'Fiach. I was asked by Ulster Television to travel with him to Rome for the

ceremony during which he received his red hat and the titular role of the guardian of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Rome.

Following this ceremony, I had the honor of meeting His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, and subsequently met him again on four separate occasions.



The highlight of these occasions was, for me, on Saturday May 2, 1982, when I, along with my daughter Susie (who was by then almost twelve years old), was invited to participate in his private mass in the little oratory in his private quarters in the Vatican. It was a privilege beyond description. I was asked to be in attendance at the Vatican with my daughter at 6:00 a.m. When we arrived, we were greeted by the Pope's private secretary, Monsignor John Magee, a fellow Irishman whom I knew well and who escorted us to the Pope's private chapel. It was a small room but very ornate, as you would imagine any such room in the Vatican to be. As we entered, the Pope was there in front of us, kneeling in very obvious meditation. We moved slowly by him to take our seats, literally a few feet away. It was almost possible to feel the intensity of his meditation. He was clearly in deep prayer. I recall saying to Susie that I had never seen anyone so lost in contemplation.

The mass was also attended by some Portuguese nuns who were helping His Holiness to prepare for a State visit the following week. Three other nuns in attendance were those who nursed him back to health after the assassination attempt on his life. We were all ushered into his study where we would have the opportunity to talk with him personally. I mentioned to Monsignor Magee the sense of awe that I felt in observing the Pope in

contemplation. Monsignor Magee replied quietly, "There is a reason, Frank." He went on to explain that some thirty minutes before our arrival, the Pope had been told of the sinking of the Belgrano, the Argentinean troop ship sunk by the British in the Falklands War.



A British submarine torpedoed the Belgrano when it was outside the exclusion zone laid down by the British government and was sailing away from the Falklands. Three hundred and sixty eight lives were lost, and he, as a world leader, was absorbing the impact of this event and contemplating the consequences. Later, the Pope joined us and chatted amiably. He was wonderfully interested in and gentle with my daughter. In her own innocent way, she told him that she had been to see him on his Papal visit to Ireland. She was mesmerized, and he hugged her. I will never forget it.

As the 1980's began, I concentrated more on the practice of law and finally retired from television in 1983.

In 1984, the conflict in Ireland fluctuated. Some people would say that it fluctuated from bad to worse. In that troubled climate, each and every citizen's personal experience of conflict grew. The terrible reality of Northern Ireland at that time was that, despite the best efforts of the British and Irish governments to support the economy, investors were jumping ship, and more and more people were becoming unemployed. That reality was disastrous to a community so torn asunder by conflict.

I had an interesting view of that aspect of life in Northern Ireland through my law practice, which was primarily industrial in its work base. We represented many trade unions and watched the development of industrial law starting with the Contracts of Employment and Redundancy Payments Act of 1965. One of the greatest employment black spots in Europe was in the city of Derry. Even the name of the city itself was divisive, as most Protestants would have called it Londonderry, whereas Catholics referred to it as Derry.

This discrepancy became immortalized by a local broadcaster named Gerry Anderson. Gerry is from Derry and has a very funny, off-the-wall sense of humor. There were rules in broadcasting in that broadcasters couldn't unilaterally decide to call it one thing or the other; they had to call it both, in a balanced fashion. Gerry's irreverence tackled the problem admirably, and in his broadcasts everyday he would refer to it as 'Derry-Stroke-Londonderry.' Eventually 'Derry-Stroke-Londonderry' gave way to 'Stroke City.'

In October of 1984, one of the major employers in Stroke City was Molins International, a multi-national organization that made cigarette-making machines. Its plant at Maydown, on the outskirts of Derry, was part of its spares division. To the horror of the local community, Molins International shut down their operation and prepared to pull it out of Northern Ireland. The community was devastated as four hundred families lost their principal means of support.

There is a characteristic of the Irish, which is both cussed and stubborn, and it was that characteristic which compelled the workforce to rebel. Instead of

standing up and leaving, they sat down and stayed. Sit-ins are notoriously futile, but they do provide a focal point for dissipating anger and allowing people to let off steam in an environment where they take comfort from each other as they express determination not to 'give in.' The workforce was comprised almost exclusively of members of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, and at that time I was their legal adviser. I was asked if I would go to Derry to keep an eye on the situation to make sure that things didn't get out of hand. Their spirit was unbreakable, and they started talking about trying to get the factory re-opened. Optimism heaped upon optimism as various avenues were explored. Officers of the government agency, the Northern Ireland Industrial Development Board, traveled to the United States to try to find a buyer. They had no luck.

Somewhere in the midst of all of this, a spark ignited as the workers coalesced into a viable entity and became determined to open the factory on their own. I stayed with the project and conducted many, many hours of negotiation with the government, with industry, and with the local community. Slowly but surely, a structure emerged which looked like it might just succeed. The workforce put its money where its mouth was by investing their own redundancy pay in a project which became known as 'Maydown Precision Engineering.' Some four months later, with incredible civic pride, a hundred men walked through the gates as part owners of their own company. They did me the honor of electing me as its first Chairman. That was in 1985, and eighteen years later, it still survives. I had the privilege of guiding it through its first six years as Chairman. During this time, I learned about conflict from an entirely different perspective. As I said earlier, it is for others to judge how I deal with conflict as a mediator. But as I look back at my life in Northern Ireland, I think I can confidently say that I know what it means.