

Growing up in Northern Ireland

A trainee teacher's response to her students' questions

On Wednesday, 28 August 1991, a massive explosion rocked Markethill, a predominantly Protestant village in Co. Armagh in Northern Ireland.

The IRA placed a 1,000 lb bomb in a van outside the police station. Forty minutes warning had been given and many buildings were evacuated.

The house of one thirteen-year-old girl belonging to one of the handful of Catholic families in the village was not evacuated.

She and her three sisters were at home and were not told of the threat. Consequently, they were lucky to escape with only cuts and bruises as the blast almost destroyed the house.

The first time this young woman spoke about her experience outside her family was nine years later, when she was a trainee teacher in a school in England, teaching students studying Ireland as part of their Modern World Study at GCSE History.

What follows are her answers to the students' questions about growing up in Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants and politics and political violence.



1. Growing up

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in a town called Markethill. It's a small village in Armagh. It's near South Armagh.

It's a predominantly Protestant village and growing up as a Catholic I was in a minority. There's not very many families. In fact, we can probably name all the families that I know that are the same religion as me.

How big is your family?

I come from a family of seven. There are five kids and I'm in the middle. I'm 22. I have a younger sister who's 13 and my brother's 20. My two older sisters are 27 and 28. We all have had different experiences of life in Northern Ireland, everybody has.

What was your school like?

I went to a school about eleven miles away from the town. It was a girls' school and a Catholic school. This is pretty normal for Northern Ireland. Most children go to either a Catholic school or a Protestant school. It is divided by their religion very much.

When I was growing up there was no such thing as mixed schools or integrated schools. There was never the opportunity for me to meet with other Protestants until I was old enough to be going out and meeting them for myself because we're very much segregated in the early years.

2. Catholics & Protestants

Did you know any Protestants when you were growing up?

When I first went to school, I didn't know the difference in religion. I thought everybody was the same religion. Because everybody's the same as you in your school as you go to school where everybody's the same religion.

When I was about five or something and going to school, my best friend and I were sitting on the bus and she says to me, 'Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?' And I said, 'I don't know, what are they?' And she says, 'Well, Mummy says I'm a Catholic.' I said, 'Well, alright then I must be a Protestant.'

You know, it was very innocent. You don't see any difference. You didn't know any different. You didn't have the opportunity to hang about with people from the different religion to you when you were at school. You know, we played different sports, wore different uniforms, went on different buses to different schools, had different cultures, different pastimes and different youth clubs. It was all very segregated.

I suppose it was never really our parent's decision to make it segregated. It's just that there wasn't an in between option for you to go to. Now there are integrated schools. There aren't many of them but they are trying to integrate cultures a bit more.

How did people know you were a Catholic?

You can only ask this if you're not from Northern Ireland. How would they not know? I'm in the minority in the town. I don't go to their school. There isn't a Catholic school in my town so I had to be bussed out. We stood at different sides of the road to get to school because our buses went in different directions. Catholic schools tend to have navy or green uniforms or brown ones and we're all called Our Ladys or St Christophers or St Claire's or St Michael's.

We play Gaelic sports. We played Gaelic football and we played hurley. We went to youth clubs where we learned how to Irish dance and play traditional Irish music. Whereas Protestants they have a different culture. They had cricket, rugby and soccer and we were never allowed to play them games. Never got to play them in school because the Irish culture was always promoted to you. It was a bit – well, people just know their religion and you know – you're brought up in different ways and everybody knows what side of the fence you are on.

What was it like for you, a Catholic, to live in a Protestant town?

You know, when we were at school because my town was really a Protestant town, I was very much aware of the Protestant culture growing up, but I wasn't aware of the nationalist culture.

When I went to school, people were all bussed in from different areas to go to school. And there were people from South Amagh there, Cullyhanna, Crossmaglen, Newtonhamilton,... and they are all from really nationalist areas, really republican areas. And it's called God's country. They like to call it God's country or bandit country as it's otherwise known. That's because the British army doesn't really have a strong hold over it. It's so republican. And their culture growing up was just so different from mine. They were coming to school with IRA on their school bags, tricolours – you know - all over them. They wore Celtic jerseys about where they lived.

We couldn't do that. I couldn't leave the house with anything of my culture on me because there would just be something for somebody to pick on me and beat me up... it's amazing how different cultures react differently.

When we were at school we had bomb drills. We had to learn how to get out of the school if a bomb went off. I think it was because our school was quite close to a police station. As well as fire drills we all had to know how to evacuate ourselves. What to do. In school we were only ever evacuated twice because of bombs. But you think it's a day out, like a fire drill – it's great.

What is the difference between Catholics and Protestants?

It's beliefs really. We believe in different things about bread and wine. Protestants have different beliefs about that - but the troubles in Northern Ireland aren't to do with the differences between the Catholic religion and the Protestant group. That's not the problem in Northern Ireland. It's not the religions. Religions are just a way of segregating the community.

You know, I was born into a Catholic family. I grew up in the Catholic faith, which was nationalist. In the Catholic faith I grew up with the nationalist culture. If your born into the Protestant, you grew up, you know, with unionism. It's nothing to do with the religion, it's just to do with the way it's segregated. A lot of nationalists and Catholics, they kind of equate with the southern Irish people because the majority of people down south are Catholic. And that's why the borders have been drawn that way. The majority of people in England are Protestant. And that's just the way it's been split.

It's not actually anything to do with religions, which is quite sad really, you know. You claim to be so holy and so devout and you rip each other apart.

Is it easy to meet Protestants now that you are grown up?

When you get older you start mixing with Protestants, well I did. I was working with Protestants, you know but it's very rare that a Catholic and a Protestant will go out together, because it's rare that they'd meet. Some families are very weird about it. My sister, well she's engaged to her boyfriend now and he's a Protestant in Markethill, so he is.

I remember when she first started going out with him. Daddy was deadly worried and didn't like it at all. I've never known my parents to be sectarian, I have never known them to have any qualms on religion but they didn't like this and it was a real shock to my system. They'd always taught us to be who we wanted to be and to go out there. Religion doesn't come into it but when my sister started going out with a boy from a different religion it did matter.

It shocked me at the time but it wasn't because they didn't want her to go out with a Protestant. It was because going out with a Protestant meant that she'd

be going into different areas, meant she'd be socialising in different pubs from what she was used to. She'd be mixing with people that he didn't know, didn't know anything about. I think he was just afraid of her safety. A lot of people didn't like that fact and she eventually moved away from Markethill, both of them did, because they got a lot of hassle in the town for like mixing.

3. Politics & political violence

Has your family been affected by 'the troubles'?

As a family I guess the main experience was the bomb we had in 1991. I was in Year 9 and about 13. It was my first real experience of violence in Northern Ireland and, although I've always been aware of violence, it was the first time I was ever affected directly.

No one in the family was seriously hurt but the house was very badly damaged. body else? Where is my family? You know, is everybody OK?

Do you think that the bomb was planted by the IRA?

Yes, it was an IRA bomb. That bomb was planted by the IRA. Because Markethill is on the edge of South Armagh, it was a very easy target. It had a manned police station in it and that's what they targeted.

They wanted to get rid of all British presence in Northern Ireland and this was their target. They didn't think of the destruction that goes along with it. They don't think about killing people's lives. It's for them, it's a one up for them kind of thing.

Have your family had to deal with other problems since the bomb went off?

I was in university when *the second bomb* went off. It was only a four hundred pound bomb but the damage was the same. There was nobody in the house that time. We were evacuated at that stage but it's just heartbreaking to come back and see your whole home in shreds, in pieces. You know, you have to start back from the beginning again and build everything up.

There's *some intimidation*. It's not very nice but you just get on with it. You know - it's nothing – nothing big really. I mean last year they built the bonfire on the rough part in front of the house. It's traditional to put the pope on top of it and a tricolour and burn the whole lot of it.

Every year, it stirs up a bit of trouble – not trouble, more like it arouses feelings that have died for a year and then back into marching season it all erupts again. We don't have any hassle one end of the year to the other from anybody in the community until the marching season comes.

Last year they put boulders through our car windows. This year we've just had silly things. They've painted our kerb stones red, white and blue and put UVF on the wall and UFF. This year they wired up a battery to make it look like a bomb outside the house and they hung a union jack from our front door. It's all silly intimidation tactics.

We know it's only young kids messing around, seeing how far they can push us to see if they can make us worried and get intimidated by it. And you go up in the town and the market and you get used to being called a Fenian and a Taig and lots of other nice names. You get used to that – you know. It's just water off a duck's back. You get on with your business and don't let people intimidate you.

How do you think that the troubles have affected you?

It's a bit of a shame really. You know I am 22 years of age and I've never known anything – only violence. I was talking with some friends of mine during the week and we never talk about the troubles, you know. It's not as if we sit around and say, 'Guess what happened to me?' You don't. It's just part of the way you were brought up. You've no need to talk about it. I haven't talked about the bomb before I spoke to you.

You don't feel the need to talk about it. Everybody's had their own experience of it. We were sitting around and we were talking about it and it was quite sad really, when I thought about it.

We were just messing around talking about old times and – you know – growing up and things and every single childhood memory we have is connected to the troubles in some way. Whether it be, "Do you remember my eighth birthday?" and we'd say, it was something like, "You know it was round the time when the eight men died at Kings Mill or it was round the time

of that bomb or remember when the mortar bomb happened?" Everything was somehow related to the troubles. It was how we set things in the context of time. I just thought, how sad.

I just thought, how do other people remember their birthdays and other important moments in their life? I bet they don't say, yes I remember when I first rode my bicycle some man got shot down the road. And that's the way we were talking and it was really quite shocking because we never really spoke about it before. And I look at you at school and I think how lucky you are. Even though you are at a Catholic school you have the opportunity to mix with people of different religions. You know, you don't think about a person as a Catholic or a Protestant.

At home in Ireland, when you meet somebody you don't know it's your first reaction to ask. You'll never say, 'What's your religion?' You'll ask what school they went to. The name of the school will give it away. 'Where are you from?' because the area you live in gives away their religion. And you go round and that is always your first thought. Back to religion and no matter how far you try and get away from it, it still matters. It still counts.

Do your family ever have any problems with police as you are a Catholic family?

No. Most Catholics aren't involved in any republican groups. They're not involved in anything military or violent, so it's not likely, you know, unless your house is burgled or something happens. The only involvement we have had with the police is after the bombs happened and they had to come in. No, no hassle at all.

Has anyone you've known been hurt?

It wasn't until I began to talk about some of my own experiences of violence that I began to realise, my god, you know, nobody I know has died. So many families have lost so many people.

One of the real things that struck me was when I was at school and I was 17. There were two boys aged 16, Gavin McShane one of them was called. He

was out on his lunch break from school and he was down in the local chip shop getting chips and two loyalists came in and opened fire and killed the two schoolboys. This is a young boy, someone that you might know - somebody in your school or something. You know the young lad, you used to go out at the weekend with him and hang about.

Whenever I go to my granny's grave, I remember him as he was buried next to it. And it was just - it just brought it home. Same age as me lying in the grave and it says on his gravestone, 'lost to the troubles'. I always think it's very sad that, every time I go, to see that. You know - the amount of wasted life.

Do you think that Northern Ireland should be part of Ireland or part of Britain?

Personally, myself, I would love to see a united Ireland. I'm a Nationalist, so I am. I don't believe in violence in achieving their means but that's what I would like. I don't think we'll see that. I don't think that would be an acceptable solution to the problem. I don't think that would ever satisfy the unionists in the north.

Have you ever thought about moving?

People have said to me, "Why don't all the Protestants just come over to England, would that not solve it all then? Why don't all the nationalists just go down into southern Ireland? Why don't they just blow the whole place up?" Yes. People often ask, 'Why do you live there?'

I often say; 'Ireland's my family, you know. Move, go somewhere else and I say; "Well, where do you go?"' This is where we've lived for 22 years, you know, your home, we've always lived in the area. To go to another area, you might just move into unionist area. They might be the same religion as you but you're not under any less threat of violence. It's not a better situation. You just get on with life and hope peace happens. And it's not as if everyday you are threatened by violence and you are worried about it -because you're not. But these things shape the way you are.



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