Preface

This book is the product of seven years' research, the majority of which was conducted after gaining my PhD in Irish Politics from Queen's University Belfast in 2010. The topic of my thesis was the decline of the Social Democratic and Labour Party in the post-Good Friday Agreement period. My interest in the SDLP stemmed from intellectual curiosity coupled with familial connections to the party. Throughout my childhood I overheard many political conversations regarding the SDLP and Irish nationalism in general, thus igniting a passion for the study of Irish politics which has remained with me to the present day. Upon completion of my PhD, I embarked formally upon research into Irish republicanism and particularly what is commonly referred to as 'dissident' republicanism. My intellectual curiosity on the topic has been present for as long as I can remember. The Irish republican hotbed of West Belfast provided me with a multitude of experiences growing up, including peeking around the door of our living room as a child to witness my mum opening the front door of our home to British soldiers who were undertaking house raids in the area. Other vivid memories include school friends of mine looking through the view-finder of British soldiers' guns while on our way to school; or walking along a path home from school thinking I was alone and hearing a rustling in the trees, only to look closer and realise there were British soldiers in the surrounding greenery. Or I vividly remember opening the front door to go to school and finding a British soldier lying in the grass of the front garden of our home holding a rifle.

I recall an incident from my childhood when I dragged a chair from our dining-room into the kitchen to climb up on it and see the men with balaclavas who were patrolling through the street, constantly turning as they walked and observing all around them, and I further recall my mum coming into the kitchen and panicking, quickly lifting me down and saying 'we're not supposed to stare at those men'. Then, at the age of twelve, while travelling home to Belfast after visiting family in Dublin with my mum, our CIÉ bus was hijacked by the IRA on Daisyhill Road in Newry in 1996. As we sat in the front seat of the bus, the first indication that something was amiss was the bus bumping up and down footpaths to avoid burnt-out vehicles scattered on the road. Then, from

the grass at the side of the road, emerged balaclava-wearing armed men who pointed their guns at the driver and while walking up and down the aisle of the bus demanded that everyone get off quickly. During that period, disturbances were taking place throughout the North of Ireland as the tension over Orange marches at Drumcree heightened. The IRA was strategically using buses to block roads across the North in protest. As soon as we had exited the bus the vehicle was blown up in front of our eyes, thus blocking the road, after which we walked down Daisyhill Road behind the Dublin driver, who was carrying his metal money box – no doubt a peculiar sight to any members of the public observing. As I grew older I became increasingly curious for knowledge about the events which surrounded me.

In another vivid memory, I recall being in my West Belfast home at ten years of age when I heard an avalanche of gunshots being fired. When I inquired as to what this was I was informed that the IRA was ceasing military activity and the shots signalled this fact. In the following days I witnessed a cavalcade of cars, including black taxis with tricolours hanging out of their windows, driving up and down the Falls Road, beeping their horns as an atmosphere of celebration and jubilation prevailed.

Throughout this research I have been asked by interviewees, who were often suspicious of an academic's motives, what my interest is in this topic. When I look back at my life to date, living in a republican heartland, it would be more curious had I not developed an interest in this topic. I can recall childhood memories of Gerry Adams coming into our area and being hailed as a God, and I developed a particular interest in those former comrades of his party who are no longer supportive of the mainstream Sinn Féin Movement. Around me in West Belfast I saw seeds of discontent blooming and growing, and more recently in 2007 I attended a Sinn Féin public meeting in Clonard Monastery. This meeting was one of several being held across the North of Ireland where senior Sinn Féin politicians were urging acceptance of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, a pivotal point in the journey of Sinn Féin from a revolutionary movement to a constitutional party. During this meeting, which took place in the actual church of the Monastery, I witnessed heated exchanges as people at the back of the church shouted words like *traitor* to the Sinn Féin politicians standing on the actual altar. This highly emotive experience left me with even deeper curiosity about the more nuanced picture regarding Irish republicanism than was being presented in the mainstream. I thus embarked on a journey of research which has culminated in this book.

This highly complex and emotive topic is not an easy one to write about. However, I feel that this is an important body of oral history that was in danger of being lost. In fact, some interviewees who have occupied senior roles in the Republican Movement and who gave me hours of their time to tell their story have since died, namely Tony Catney (Belfast), Gerry McKerr (Lurgan) and

Brendan Madden (Galway). Several of the interviewees for this work, including Gerry McKerr and Brendan Madden, have never given another known interview to any other study.

I would like to thank my interviewees for staying with this research through turbulent waters.

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