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Joe McCann, IRA gunman, and his three months under the gospel

by Rev Ivan Foster



Joe McCann

The death of IRA man, Joe McCann, is once again in the news. Attempts are being made to put on trial those soldiers who were involved in the firefight when Joe McCann was shot by paratroopers.

McCann (24) was commander of the Official IRA's third Belfast battalion. In February 1972, McCann was involved in the attempted assassination of Ulster Unionist politician John Taylor. He was regarded by the security forces as a dangerous terrorist. McCann was shot by soldiers in disputed circumstances in Joy Street in the Markets area, close to his home, on April 15, 1972.

One of the men, Soldier C, is a grandfather from Hampshire, England, who served with distinction for 23 years. "How can this be justice?" he asked. "It is a disgrace. I was doing my duty in Northern Ireland, trying to protect the public and keep the peace. Now I am being thrown to the wolves."

I had a close association with Joe in the Crumlin Road Jail for three months in 1966. Most Free Presbyterians will, I hope, know that Dr Ian Paisley, Rev John Wylie and I, a second year student at the Free Presbyterian Theological Hall, spent 90 days in prison as a result of being prosecuted for our part in a protest against the ecumenism of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland on 6th June 1966.

I recall on the first day of my sentence being marched before the Prison Governor. He informed me that I would be required to work during my stay at "Her Majesty's Hotel" as the prison was euphemistically called by some inmates. I was given a choice which included the woodyard, cutting up tree branches for firewood. Another choice was the carpentry shop. I jumped at that, having an interest in joinery, my father being a joiner.

First Day

On my first day in the joiner's workshop, I became acquainted with the civilian instructor. He introduced himself as a Christian. Within the limits of his supervisory role, we had many a good time of fellowship. On that first day, I also met Joe McCann. Joe was a brash, cheerful character who introduced himself with a broad grin. He knew who I was because the imprisonment of Ian Paisley and his companions had been big news for a number of days.

Despite the strict rules that were enforced in the workshop which forbade free association, I was able to have frequent conversations with Joe and another of his companions whose name I think was Seamus Murphy. Joe and his two companions, for there was another lad but I really had little contact with him, were serving a sentence as juveniles for possession of explosives. He was 18 years old at the time.

I believe it right to say of Joe that he was at that time a devout Roman Catholic. He and his companions were allowed out of the workshop to visit a priest for their 'confessions' to be heard about 2 or 3 times a week.

I used his public religious affiliation as a means of opening a conversation with him on the things of God.

I recall being questioned by him and Seamus on the person of the Virgin Mary. I responded quite correctly and honestly, but I acknowledge that I chose my language carefully for I was out to engage their minds and hearts. I said of Mary that I believed her to be one of the greatest and most holy women that had ever lived. I extolled Mary as high as the Word of God permitted me and that was very high indeed. I quoted Luke 1:28-31. "And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her



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mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS."

I explained how it was the joy of every true Protestant to rejoice in the grace and holiness of Mary, the Saviour's mother.

On another occasion, the subject of praying for the dead came up. Joe quoted what he believed was what the Bible taught on the matter. His words to me were: "Paul said, it is a holy and blessed thing to pray for the dead."

I responded that I thought that I had read the Bible pretty closely but I could not remember ever reading that verse. I suggested that when he was at 'Confession', he should ask his priest just where that verse was found. When Joe returned from his next visit to 'Confession', he avoided me most assiduously. I was not free to chase after him to confront him but when we were lining up at the end of the day to return to our cells, I had the opportunity to move into line beside Joe. Even though talking was forbidden, I was able to whisper to him: "The priest told you to stay away from me, didn't he Joe?"



An alleged picture of Joe McCann during the IRA's attack on the Ing-lis Bakery in the Markets area of Belfast

There was no response from Joe and indeed he continued to avoid me for the next day or two. However, Joe was an intelligent lad and he saw clearly that I had gained the high ground in this discussion and that unsettled him. He came over to me when it was convenient and began to ask some very serious and pertinent questions whereby I was able over the ensuing weeks to press upon him the conflicts between the Word of God and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. I sought to explain the wonders of the Gospel message of salvation through Christ alone. I pressed home the truths set forth in Ephesians 2:8-9. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."

I look back on those conversations with joy as we had an opportunity to press home the claims of Christ upon this young man and his companion Seamus.

Naturally, the subject of republicanism and his embracing of terrorism came up. I recall Joe saying how dedicated he was to the IRA campaign. He honestly and boldly told me that, were he ordered to, he would shoot me dead. I did suggest that I might have something to say about that!!

When the last day of my sentence came round, as I was leaving the workshop for my cell both Joe and Seamus came over to me to bid me goodbye. I remember Seamus saying that he was surprised by what I had repeatedly said about the Virgin Mary. He said that he had thought that Protestants hated Mary.

As I marched to my cell, that was my last contact with Joe McCann!

Late Night News

Some years later, on the night of April 15, 1972, my wife Ann and I were listening to the midnight news, as most people did in those days. One of the items on the news bulletin was of a shooting in the Cromac area of Belfast. The newsreader related how that an IRA man had been shot by the army and that he had died later of his wounds. That man was Joe McCann.

My mind went back six years to my times of talking with Joe and my pressing him and his friend Seamus



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about their need of repenting of their sins and embracing Christ by faith if they were ever to enter heaven.

I freely admit my heart was filled with grief and I shed tears over the sad fate of that young man. Yes, he died as a terrorist, but he had gone out into eternity embracing the gun and very obviously rejecting Christ. That is a matter of infinite sorrow and grief.

Recent

Only in recent days, spurred by recent newspaper articles on Joe McCann's shooting, have I pondered again those events of 50 years ago and some things come to my mind. While I was preaching in a gospel mission in one of our churches in County Down, a brother in Christ used to wait behind after the meeting to talk to me. He was a policeman and had been stationed near to where I was living in 1971-74. He asked me one night if I recalled the night the Official IRA made an attempt to shoot me. I had no such memory of such an event and I was surprised at him asking me about it, for I felt that had I known about it I would remember!

My response made that brother very angry and he vehemently burst out with the exclamation: "You mean to tell me they never told you of the attempt to murder you?" I repeated that I knew nothing of any such incident. He then began to tell how he had been informed by a Special Branch officer, some time after the event, of an attempt by Official IRA members to shoot me. Well, that is what they set out to do, but they ran out of petrol and were intercepted by the police and weapons were recovered and a confession was obtained. The Special Branch man expressed the opinion that it was rather a pity they hadn't managed to achieve their objective. I was considered rather an uncompromising individual and there were those, it would appear, who would have welcomed my removal from the scene!

It was shortly after this incident that Joe McCann was shot. He was a leading member of the Official IRA at that time. I just wonder if it had been reported to Official IRA "Headquarters" that I had come to live in an isolated area convenient to the border. This attempt on my life came about shortly after my moving to one of the few areas, outside of Belfast, where the Official IRA operated. The Republican terror group was a dwindling force at that time in the face of the Provisional IRA's expansion.

As it was, Joe McCann, the man who had told me "that, were he ordered to, he would shoot me dead" was himself shot dead a few months later.

Strange to relate, on one occasion as I was giving my testimony and I briefly mentioned my time in jail and my conversations with Joe, a Christian policeman stayed behind to speak with me about Joe McCann. He said he was at the incident in which Joe was shot. He told me Joe was shot in the thigh and the bullet was deflected off a leg bone and travelled up through his body, severing arteries and seriously injuring vital organs. He was taken to hospital but died shortly after.

Again, sadness filled my heart as I thought of the young lad with whom Providence had brought me briefly into contact. Now I was in possession of the final details of his life.

Whatever the outcome of the efforts by Republicans to implicate as criminal the soldiers involved in that final confrontation with Joe back in 1972, in the dark streets of the Markets area of Belfast, it will not change the eternal destiny of poor Joe McCann.

19th July 2016.