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Philip McGarry: Contrasting words of Pam Morrison and Gerry Adams reflect the better angels of our nature or the worst of our past

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Gerry Adams described Gerry McKenna as 'a patriot, a decent man doing his best in very difficult times'

Last week saw two very significant and contrasting interpretations of our recent history in Northern Ireland.

The first was the moving testimony of Pam Morrison, speaking publicly for the first time about her three brothers who were separately hunted down and murdered by the IRA in rural Fermanagh in the 1980s.

The second was the funeral of Kevin Mc Kenna, allegedly a former IRA leader.

Ronnie Graham was killed in June 1981 as he was delivering coal.

In November 1981 Cecil Graham was leaving his in-laws' house where his Catholic wife was staying with their prematurely born five week old son Darren, when the IRA shot

him 16 times.

In February 1985 Jimmy Graham was parking his school bus at a primary school in Derrylin when he was shot 26 times.

At the inquest into Cecil's killing in 1983 his father-in-law said, shockingly, that not one of his neighbours had ever even mentioned Cecil's murder, never mind expressed any sympathy.

In the London Review of Books in 2007 Fintan O Toole wrote about Cecil's son Darren Graham, then 25, who had been brought up as a Protestant, but was a talented gaelic football and hurling player.

Darren had just withdrawn from playing due to years of sectarian abuse by fellow players. He had received very limited support from the GAA authorities. At his last match he was told: "you're a black c...".

Another player repeated this. (Darren's skin colour is white; this use of the word 'black' is a nasty term of sectarian abuse directed at Protestant people).

The killing of the three Graham brothers is a perfect illustration of the communal intimacy and sickeningly routine nature of the violence meted out by paramilitaries, nationalist and unionist, over more than three decades, which is all too often sanitised as 'the conflict' or even worse, 'war'.

This was not a 'war' in the sense that any credible authority uses that term.

Colm Toibin, in his book 'Bad Blood, A Walk along the Irish Border' (1987) described how the silence about the killings in the local area actually overlay a sense of deep unease, with one person telling him about a spate of recent serious car accidents involving young Catholic men: "people think it's revenge ... God, you know, it was God".

Commenting on this Fintan O Toole wondered if the sectarianism directed at Darren was : 'unspoken guilt, transmuted into irrational fear and channelled into abuse'.

Pam Morrison decided to speak last week because she is the only one of eight siblings still alive, and she was determined that this family catastrophe would not be forgotten.



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Her patently sincere and generously minded spirit was deeply moving.

Kevin McKenna was widely reported to have been the IRA's so called 'Chief of Staff' during the 1980s and 1990s.

At his funeral Gerry Adams described him as: 'a patriot, a decent man doing his best in very difficult times'. He claimed: 'The republican people of the North never went to war. The war came to us'.

He added: 'Among the rolling hills, the villages and the roads Kevin and his comrades relentlessly and defiantly fought the British army'.

In truth, the outworking of the IRA's so called 'war' was the cruel and totally unjustified and and unjustifiable killing of Ronnie, Cecil and Jimmy Graham, not to mention their 1,770 other victims.

The three brothers brought no 'war' to republicans; it was the IRA who brought their brutal violence to them.

Seamus Heaney memorably characterised this type of killing in the menacing phrase 'neighbourly murder'.

There is no human right to be allowed to kill people.

It was wrong for 50 Muslims to be killed in March this year in New Zealand.

It was wrong for 300 Christians to be massacred in Sri Lanka in April.

It was wrong for 11 Jews to be murdered in a synagogue in Pittsburgh last November.

It was no less wrong for the UVF to kill, for example, 15 Catholic people in Mc Gurk's bar in 1971.

It was no less wrong for the IRA to kill the three Graham brothers.

In his book 'Midwinter Break', Bernard MacLavery's character Gerry says: 'If the end of human decency is the price of a united Ireland Gerry wanted nothing to do with it.'

There was no human decency in the killing of the three Graham brothers.

The words of Pam Morrison and Gerry Adams last week represent two totally different sets of values.

One set resonates with the better angels of our nature; the other regresses to the worst of our past.

As a society we can choose which one will guide us into the future.

Dr McGarry worked as a consultant Psychiatrist in Belfast from 1991.

He retired last week.