



# Gerry's Dark Shadows

*Gerry Adams: An Unauthorised Life*  
Malachi O'Doherty • Faber & Faber • 2017

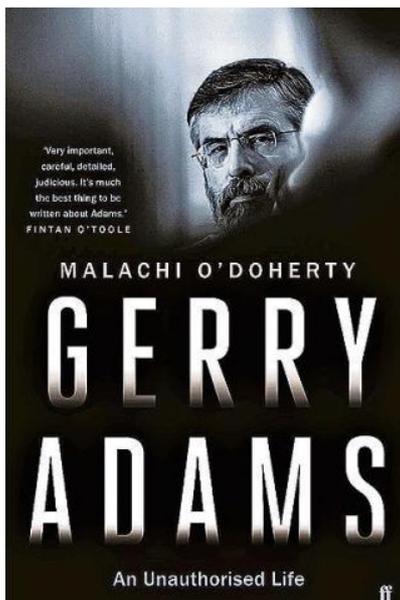
Brian McClinton

**T**HERE is widespread myth of the Provisional IRA as a resolute organisation fully aware of why it exists and what it was doing. It is a common misunderstanding of a group that lurks in the shadows and whose leaders cultivate a mask of mystery and impenetrability. Gerry Adams, the pope of militant Irish republicanism, is a classic example. In his 'unauthorised life', Malachi O'Doherty tries valiantly to throw light on his dark shadows but quotes Máiría Cahill, who was raped by an IRA man: "I don't think even Gerry Adams knows who Gerry Adams is" (p310).

At the age of fifteen, young Gerry was a devout Catholic who wanted to join the Christian Brothers, a religious congregation which educates Catholic boys that has a reputation for fearsome discipline. Gerry senior was furious when he heard of his son's pedagogic ambitions and shouted that it would suit him better to join the IRA and fight for his country. It appears, if some of his associates are to be believed, that this advice sank in and, rather than frighten schoolboys, Gerry opted for a more adult form of terror.

Malachi returns to the issue of whether Adams was in the IRA almost as often as Adams has publicly denied it. Dolours Price said that he was her 'commanding officer' who ordered the killing of Jean McConville, and Brendan Hughes – with whom he was arrested in 1973 – confirmed both claims. Others not mentioned in Malachi's book, including the late former IRA member Sean O'Callaghan, Peter Rogers and Evelyn Gilroy, affirmed his IRA membership. The British government, in inviting him to talks along with known IRA members, would also appear to have believed it. After a preliminary meeting in 1972, Philip Woodfield, one of the two government delegates, in his report to Secretary of State William Whitelaw described Adams as a 'prominent leader' of 'indiscriminate campaigns of bombing and shooting'. As Malachi points out, he is also named as an IRA leader in several books, both by journalists and by academics, including J. Bowyer Bell, M.S. Smith, Peter Taylor and Ed Moloney.

As someone once asked, if Gerry Adams wasn't in the IRA, then why not? After all, some of his closest friends and colleagues were members, and since 1983 he has



been President of Sinn Féin which, according to many, including former IRA prisoner Richard O'Rawe, was controlled by the IRA. So, although Adams denies that he is a duck, he looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck. He even plays with other ducks in his bath.

There are many possible reasons why Adams would deny IRA leadership. According to Richard O'Rawe, "Gerry didn't do operations, ever. Gerry was a sender-out. He was up to his balls in it. And he needed to be because the IRA controlled Sinn Féin" (p175). O'Rawe also says that "Adams to us was a God, an intellectual giant walking among midgets" (p152). This might suggest that he was the 'brains' of the operation, or at least one of them.

If Gerry Adams was a leader of the IRA from the 1970s, then he was presumably involved in planning crimes against humanity such as Bloody Friday and the murder of Jean McConville in 1972. It is impossible to see how planting bombs in bus stations, hotels or fish shops can be ethically justified. What was the purpose other than blatant terrorism?

Why was a 'war' prolonged for so long when the IRA could not possibly achieve a united Ireland by such means? Indeed, in this respect the terrorism was counter-productive and the IRA became a major obstacle to its own goal. In recent years, Adams has stated that the 'armed struggle' was not a principle but a tactic to achieve civil rights. Yet from many of their own accounts, it is extremely hard to believe that volunteers were persuaded to kill people just to have votes in local government elections.

Apologists for the Provos have argued that there was no alternative after Protestant attacks on Catholic homes in August 1969. The IRA had to arm itself for the defence of Catholics. In other words, it was a just war of last resort. Malachi addresses this argument more fully in his earlier work *The Trouble with Guns*, where he argues that it is completely disingenuous. The IRA was actually prepared to endanger the lives of ordinary Catholics and at times it used the local population as a shield with which to provoke the British army and loyalists into attack. Loyalist violence against Catholics increased -->

as IRA violence against the police and army and commerce increased, and he concludes that “the Catholics of Belfast felt that they were never as well defended as when the IRA was stood down” (op.cit. p92).

In truth, the IRA waged a squalid campaign of violence against anyone who was designated a ‘legitimate’ target – an elastic term which encompassed policemen as well as soldiers, workers as well as security personnel, politicians as well as drug addicts. A brutal, sectarian dimension to the Provisional campaign was evident in the relentless bombing of Protestant businesses and attacks on farms, civilians and policemen in the border areas.

The IRA was not a liberation army waging an armed struggle against the last vestiges of British rule. Frequent parallels are made with other ‘freedom fighters’ like the PLO and the ANC, with Gerry Adams seen as the equivalent of a Mandela. But in South Africa the ANC was banned from elections until 1994, though it was clearly supported by the majority of the population. It had tried non-violence but was met with brutal repression. On the other hand, the IRA’s political wing could contest elections and never received the support of many Catholics until it abandoned violence.

The IRA nevertheless carefully fostered the liberation myth. In 1993 it stated: “The British government and its armed forces bear ultimate responsibility for the conflict and the armed struggle is aimed primarily at them”. This statement was made in the wake of the Shankill bomb which, like most IRA atrocities, killed no British forces but instead murdered Irish people in a horrific manner. It was a strange liberation army that killed more of its own people than the colonial invaders.

The IRA’s so-called war was therefore confused, immoral and futile. Like died-in-the-wool unionists, its leaders were slow learners. By the 1980s, the strategy was becoming a mixture of ‘the armalite and the ballot box’. During the 1981 hunger strike Adams advised on its direction through smuggled letters. The charge against him is that he deliberately orchestrated the deaths of the 10 hunger strikers in order to court sympathy and support for Sinn Féin. After the first four deaths, a compromise was offered by the British government. Richard O’Rawe says that “the Brits were genuinely looking for a way out” (p154). But the offer was rejected by Adams and more men died. It was apparently Adam who conceived of the idea of a dying Bobby Sands fighting the Fermanagh South Tyrone seat from prison, with Sinn Féin running his campaign. Thus the world would hear of another brave martyr for ‘old Ireland’.

The second part of the book is called ‘Politics takes over’ (the first part is ‘Street Warrior’). Adams won the West Belfast seat in the 1983 general election and was also elected President of Sinn Féin. He now stepped out from

the shadows and Malachi says that he began to work on creating a public image: “From the start, this persona was presented as wise and well grounded, civilised and gentle, the feminist man who loves children, the natural democrat” (p185). He wrote books such as *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, but always avoided the question of why freedom fighters needed to kill so many civilians.

In the third part of the book – ‘Peace Processing’ – Malachi says that he brought the armed campaign to an end and it wasn’t easy and he believes he deserves some credit for that. He again quotes Richard O’Rawe: “I’m glad that Gerry Adams stopped the war and led the whole movement by the nose into the peace process. Somebody had to do it and he was the only one who could” (p226). But of course it seems that it was he more than anyone who dragged militant republicanism into that long war in the first place. Like Paisley, he fanned the flames of sectarian hatred for most of his life before finally becoming a peacemaker. It seems that we all have to suffer to indulge the whims of some troublemakers on their long road to enlightenment.

The author doesn’t really penetrate to the heart of Adams. Perhaps he doesn’t have one. The book is readable but at times appears too much like a collection of articles and relies too much on interviews. It doesn’t contain any substantial new material and it lacks the analytical qualities of Malachi’s 1998 book *The Trouble with Guns* or Ed Moloney’s *A Secret History of the IRA*, published in

2007, which it has been suggested should be called ‘A Secret History of Gerry Adams’.

Malachi clearly agrees with the Republic’s Michael McDowell that Adams is a ‘pathological liar’. The alleged cover-ups of sexual abuse are good examples, and Malachi devotes a chapter to Máiría Cahill’s allegation of rape by an IRA man of herself and others. Whereas Adams claims that he urged her to go to the police, Máiría insists that the opposite was the case. Finally, in 2009 she did go to the police when she discovered that Aine Adams, Gerry’s niece, had been raped and that her father, Gerry’s brother Liam, was being sought. Eventually Liam was brought back to the North to face trial. Gerry was called as a witness as he had known of the rape for years. In 2013 Liam Adams was sentenced to 16 years for raping his daughter.

Neither of these cases shows Gerry Adams in a favourable light. They display the animal cunning and deceit which has been so much a part of his character. He will say that the party which he has led since 1983, almost as long as Robert Mugabe, and from which he will resign the leadership this year, is in a strong position both north and south. But animal cunning doesn’t change societies, and Sinn Féin needs to be rid of all those prominent figures associated with its murderous past. For there is no alternative to peaceful persuasion. □



Martin Meehan (centre) with Gerry Adams at a funeral in Belfast in 1971 of a Belfast IRA commander.