

Sinn Fein should never be able to escape Jean McConville's ghost

It is almost 38 years since the Belfast mother was abducted and killed by the IRA, yet no one has been found guilty of her murder



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It is almost 38 years ago to the day that a gang of masked IRA men and women in West Belfast burst through Jean McConville's door. Jean had been recently widowed and was alone in the house, along with seven of her 10 children. "They came into the house and told my mother to put on her coat," her son Archie, who was 16 then, recalled at the inquest many years later. "We were all in a panic and the children were squealing everywhere. We were afraid of what they were going to do to our mother."

They waited all night for her return. And the next. Helen, who was 15, tried to look after the younger children, which included her six-year-old twin brothers. There was no word the first week, nor the second. Finally, after three weeks, the now hungry and terrified family were visited by a stranger who gave them Jean's purse – with 52p still inside it – and her three rings.

Two months after Jean's disappearance, the family were split up by social services and sent down into the bowels of the system. These children, who had all witnessed their mother's abduction, were told again and again that she had deserted them.

So what really happened to Jean McConville? Even now, three decades later, there are so many lies and gaps surrounding her story that the picture remains unclear. Her children are unsure about certain details, though not in the important one: "We just waited and waited from that night, for years and years."

This is what we do know. Jean was originally a Protestant from East Belfast who converted to Catholicism when she married Arthur McConville. The couple suffered sectarian persecution by both communities and they were forced to move around until they ended up in the Falls Road. Jean's ambiguous status in West Belfast turned ugly after Arthur's death from cancer in 1971. Her fate was sealed when neighbours allegedly saw her give aid to a wounded British soldier. The bereaved family had only been in their new flat for a week when she was taken away, the day after being beaten up in a bingo hall.

We also now know that she was interrogated and tortured after the abduction; she was beaten with such force that her bones cracked and her hands were mutilated. The actual cause of death was a single shot to the back of the head. Jean was then taken across the border and secretly buried on Shelling Beach in County Louth. For over 27 years, the IRA maintained that it had no connection with her disappearance.

We also now know what happened next in the great catalogue of crimes committed against Jean McConville. Despite receiving two notifications of her abduction, the RUC failed even to record the complaint. CID inquiries in that area of Belfast, it was later explained, "were restricted to the most serious cases" in those days. Not only was

nothing done to locate Jean, but the RUC refused to accept that she was missing, preferring, instead, to believe the word of an anonymous tip-off that she had absconded with a British soldier.

The only investigation that did take place was into Jean herself. In 2003, a storm washed away part of the embankment supporting the west side of Shelling Beach car park. Jean's corpse was exposed. The IRA now admitted responsibility for her murder, with the new justification that she had been an informant. Thus began an intense search for the truth – not into who killed her and why – but whether Jean had been responsible for her own death. Was she or was she not an informer? And, therefore, was she or was she not a secret combatant or the victim of a war crime.

For once in Jean's tragic history, someone did right by her. The lord chief justice, Robert Carswell, ruled that in this one instance the government should break the policy commonly known as NCND (neither confirm nor deny) and reveal any secret service dealings that had taken place with Mrs McConville. There were none. In 2006, the police ombudsman for Northern Ireland, [Baroness Nuala O'Loan](#), ruled that Jean McConville had never been an agent at any time. "She was an innocent woman who was abducted and murdered."

The RUC has since apologised for its failure to investigate her crime. The IRA has issued a general apology of sorts, saying it "regrets the suffering" of Jean's family. No doubt there are some people who believe that this is enough to satisfy the demands of justice. There is certainly an argument to be made that the peace process is too important and too fragile to be held hostage by any single case.

But what lies at stake here is not just peace or justice, but the basic values that unite us and define us as a moral society. First, a man has been publicly accused by two of his confederates of ordering Jean's murder and disappearance. That man is [Gerry Adams](#) and his confederates are the late [Brendan Hughes](#), the commander of the IRA Belfast Brigade, and the Old Bailey bomber [Dolours Price](#). Adams, who "rejects" the allegations against him, is standing for the Dáil and has a very good chance of soon being elected member (TD) for County Louth, the same county where Jean was hidden.

Ireland is a member of the [International Criminal Court](#) whose charter clearly states that the definition of a war crime includes the murder of civilians in "an armed conflict not of an international character". Thus a man whose name is alleged to be a war criminal, who is alleged to have broken the law in one of the worst crimes in Irish and Northern Irish history, is poised to become a governor and maker of that country's laws.

Second, though it was a group of individuals who killed Jean McConville, it is society that condoned her persecution in life and afterwards. Prejudice made her fall foul of the IRA because she had Protestant blood and because she had shown mercy to the enemy. Prejudice, because she was a Catholic from the wrong part of town, made her invisible to the officers of law and order. Prejudice, because she was a social outcast, enabled people to trash her reputation. Prejudice, because she was an uneducated woman without means or connections to men in power – or with guns, has allowed her murder to go unpunished.

It is our lack of will that lies behind the continued denial of justice to Jean McConville. Yet there is something that we can do now for her and for ourselves before our silence turns us from spectators into passive accomplices. We can remember her. We can memorialise her and all that she represents. Teach her story to future generations and at least the moral debt owed to Jean McConville can be repaid. Jean McConville. Jean McConville. Jean McConville. Jean McConville.