



In Clara, County Monaghan, Elizabeth McAnespie tends the grave of her son Aidan, who was shot by a British soldier

NORTHERN IRELAND

A Death on the Border

It was a tragedy of some sort—accident or murder, the young man was dead—and it serves to put a human face on “the Troubles,” that faceless, abstract affliction

ALONG A HIGH RIDGE above the camouflaged British Army barracks and the gardens that, by their very proximity to the barracks, are considered dangerous to tend, sits Aughnacloy, a small market town in Northern Ireland on the border with the Irish Republic. Below the town, on the south side of the hill, are the blast walls and watchtowers of the British Army checkpoint. The border it guards, drawn seventy years ago, has little to do with any straight-line notion

of geography. It was established on demographic lines, to reserve for Britain the six northeastern counties that seemed likely to have a Protestant majority in perpetuity. The border bisects villages and farms, but here in County Tyrone, where County Monaghan, in the Irish Republic, pushes north like a fin, it corresponds briefly with the landscape, following the dark and narrow River Blackwater. In centuries past the river was a corridor for conquest and rebellion. Today, in the green fields and hedgerows beyond the checkpoint, it is the only sign of a border otherwise as invisible as a sniper's rifle.

One sunny Sunday afternoon in 1988 Aidan McAnespie, twenty-three, parked his car on the Aughnacloy side of the checkpoint and walked past the soldiers on his way to a Gaelic football game in a field that lies in the broad expanse of no-man's-land between the checkpoint and the border. He was on foot because his car, a maroon sedan with big stereo speakers in the back, frequently gave the soldiers a reason to delay him. On good days that meant questions and a search. On bad days

it meant death threats and physical abuse.

The soldiers on duty were Grenadier Guards, and they were heavily armed. Irish Republican Army guerrillas have often opened fire on the checkpoint and have bombed it twice, killing one soldier on the spot. On the wall inside are photographs of people to watch out for. The soldiers also have lists of names. According to local people, these names include the McAnespies and their friends.

In Aughnacloy the McAnespies are known as Republicans, sympathetic with the aims, at least, of the IRA. Aidan's sister Eilish McCabe once ran as a candidate for Sinn Fein, the IRA's political arm, and Aidan's three older brothers live in the Irish Republic and do not come north of the border.

Aidan McAnespie was not a member of the IRA, but the soldiers did not seem to know this, and he had to pass them at the checkpoint twice a day on his way to and from work, at a poultry-processing plant in Monaghan. He said as little to them as possible, but he often wore a SPIRIT OF FREEDOM but-



ton in memory of Bobby Sands, an IRA member and a member of the British Parliament, who died on a hunger strike in prison in 1981. Aidan was a small, wiry man, and on one occasion a soldier stood on him. Another time he was grabbed by the throat and slammed to the ground. Aidan would stop on his way home to call his mother from the filling station just south of the checkpoint. She would bicycle down through the checkpoint to meet him, put her bike in the trunk, and ride back with her son. The soldiers laughed at her. She persisted.

On this afternoon, however, Elizabeth McAnespie was still in Monaghan, after a wake for her brother-in-law the night before. Aidan had walked some 290 yards past the checkpoint, past the filling station and up a gentle hill lined with bare hedges, transparent in the unseasonable February sun. A few more steps and he would have been around the bend and out of sight. Cars carrying players and spectators to the game had been driving past, but the road was empty and no one saw Aidan at the exact moment he fell. A girl glancing up from the filling station thought he was a bundle of laundry dropped on the road. One of the first motorists who stopped to help thought he was a drunk.

The army said afterward that the bullet was fired accidentally by a young soldier in one of the towers. They said it ricocheted off the road before striking its victim. The army

called it a tragic error. Remembering the death threats, the victim's family and friends, and Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich, who came to speak at Aidan's funeral mass, called it murder.

"It is inevitable that a suggestion that death was due to a freak accident of an extraordinary kind must give rise to disbelief," said Charles Haughey, the Taoiseach, or Irish Prime Minister. In the five years before this incident police and army undercover units had been involved, by my count, in forty-seven suspicious shootings along the border. An independent British police investigation into some of these shootings had ended as a fiasco for all concerned. When the senior police investigator, Deputy Chief Constable John Stalker, of Greater Manchester, began pushing for evidence withheld from him by MI-5, the British domestic-intelligence service, he was yanked out. Only a few weeks before the McAnespie shooting the British Attorney General said that the whole matter would be dropped, in the interests of "national security." Justice, he admitted to Parliament, would not be done. At about this time the government also disclosed that the one British soldier ever convicted of murder for a shooting in Northern Ireland had been quietly returned to active duty after serving only two years of a life sentence.

The Irish government, Haughey said, would conduct its own investigation. No findings were ever made public, although a leak to the *Irish Press*

said the authorities south of the border had come to agree with those in the north, that the shooting had been accidental. Charges against the soldier of "unlawful killing" were dismissed. A song deplored the shooting—the soldiers once mockingly played it over the loudspeakers at the checkpoint, the McAnespie family says—but as months have turned into years, the case has faded from view. And yet, if there is a point at which one can finally begin to understand the conflict in Ireland, in all its violence and confusion, it is probably here on this disputed border, in the obscure town where Aidan McAnespie lived and died.

AUGHNACLOY HAS fewer than a thousand people, about 70 percent of them Protestants, and it has been a garrison town since the 1700s. Troops went from Aughnacloy to join Wellington's army to fight Napoleon at Waterloo. The name of the town means "stony field." When the English arrived, there was a cairn (the word comes from the Celtic *carn*) dating back to about 700 B.C. at nearby Carnteel. Cairns were resting places of kings and warriors, sanctuaries that in the eyes of the Irish could not be violated without dishonor. Local lore has it that colonists from England and Scotland used the stones from the cairn at Carnteel to build their houses.

County Tyrone was the last stronghold of resistance during the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland. At the end, in 1607, the land here was seized from the native Irish, who were killed or driven off, and given to those who had served the Crown. The surviving natives were pushed onto bogs and the unproductive highlands, and land-ownership patterns remain the same to this day. "The Protestants got the land," the Catholics say in Tyrone. "We got the view."

The impulse to obliterate was strong. At the cemetery in Carnteel the Celtic crosses were hacked off Catholic graves. A Protestant church built on this site was burned in the Irish rebellion of 1641, but a large Union Jack still flies over the graveyard from a ruined wall.

Aughnacloy started to become a town in the seventeenth century. Jonathan Swift once went there to visit a local squire. After 1812 it was a stop on the coach road from Dublin to Derry,



The Protestant end of Aughnacloy, Northern Ireland



the ancient Irish city renamed Londonderry by the British. Part of the old road, grass-covered, runs through the top of the McAnespies' vegetable garden. The McAnespie home is at the northern edge of the town, just a few blocks from a large Catholic church, St. Mary's, where the McAnespie brothers served as altar boys. Parishioners call St. Mary's "the chapel," in a holdover from the seventeenth-century days when Catholics in this area had to meet secretly for mass in sheds or around a rock outdoors. The word "church" was reserved for the Established Church.

On market day Aughnacloy briefly comes alive with stalls and cars. Otherwise it seems a sleepy town, slightly down on its luck when compared with other border towns; it has poor public services and very few jobs for its young. Many youths go to England or the States, to Belfast or over the border to Monaghan or Dublin.

Ultimately, it seems to be the question of who will leave and who will stay that plays on the emotions of this place. Nationalists, who are almost all Catholics, feel that they are being pushed out whereas it is the British who should leave, erasing the border behind them. Unionists, including almost all the Protestants, feel outnumbered on the island of Ireland. They want to keep the border and their British ties at any cost.

"It seems to bug them, it definitely seems to bug them, that you should have anything," says Michael Muldoon, a Catholic who grew up just outside Aughnacloy, on his family's small farm in Reahagy, a mostly Protestant area. The telephone would ring at three or four o'clock in the morning, and a voice would say, "Get out, you Fenian bastards. We're gonna burn you out."

A friend of Aidan McAnespie's, Muldoon recently moved into town in part so that he wouldn't be quite so vulnerable to threats. Ironically, he now lives only a few yards from the checkpoint. Muldoon says he is constantly harassed by the soldiers and the police. He draws the line at leaving, unlike many other young Catholic men.

Along the border many Protestants, especially the thousands who have ties with the police and the army, also live in fear. The police and the army sustained 850 fatalities—nearly a third of

all the violent deaths in Northern Ireland—from 1969 to 1988. But the Protestants also fear that they will lose their birthright through the loss of their state. Talk to them long enough and they will bring up the nightmare of being "outbred" and outnumbered by the Catholics.

The prospect that some future Catholic majority in the North might vote to join the Catholic state in the South—a slim prospect addressed by Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Garret FitzGerald in the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement—is for many Protestants a vision of cultural annihilation.

SO FORMIDABLE IS the checkpoint on the Monaghan road that a visitor might wonder why the army worries so much about security. To understand, one has only to walk down the Ravella road, which begins at the center of Aughnacloy as a sloping lane. Below the town it flattens out, passing through pastures and wildflowers, heading southwest toward the border. The Ravella road is an "unapproved" crossing, landmined by the IRA to attack the police, blown up by the army to close it to the IRA, and rebuilt by farmers whenever possible. The road is now intact but barricaded at the bridge over the river with a concrete wall topped by steel spikes. A small gap, wide enough to let a pedestrian or a bicycle through, has been left on one side. Still, locals say, the cattle smugglers get across, putting ramps from their trucks up over the wall so that the cattle can jump into the North.

Guerrillas also move arms and explosives across the border, which is honeycombed with unapproved crossings—sometimes a road, sometimes a dirt track through a farmer's field, sometimes a path over a culvert and a trickle of water. Since partition, smuggling has been common here (women used to smuggle butter in petticoat pockets), and the smugglers even built their own "roads," lines of stones to make passable the mud in ditches or depressions below the main roads, out of view of the patrols above.

The army and the police are said to maintain an unimaginably high level of surveillance here, but there are so many places that one can cross the border on foot, and have easy access to roads on the other side, that the check-

point on the Monaghan road seems as much a symbol as anything else. "An aggravation point, I'd call it," says George Todd, a Protestant who spent nine years in the British Army and now owns the filling station and general store between the checkpoint and the border. "As a security measure, it's useless."

Todd's son David won a lawsuit against the Ministry of Defense for an incident in January of 1986, in which a soldier threatened to shoot him and struck him twice on the head with a rifle butt. Todd will not discuss that incident, but he does say that deliverymen refuse to bring milk or bread or vegetables through the checkpoint, and he recalls that the soldiers, saying that they suspected a bomb, once poured out an entire shipment of milk before he could get there to pick it up.

In fact the IRA has at least twice used milk churns to hold explosives in Aughnacloy, bombing the army barracks and the center of town, but both times local Protestant farmers were compelled by force to drive the bombs into town. Neither came through the checkpoint or across the border, and neither was likely to be stopped or questioned at a roadblock anywhere else; Protestants rarely are, and in a place as small as Aughnacloy everyone knows who's Protestant and who's Catholic.

AIDAN MCANESPIE was four years old when the Troubles began, in 1969. By the time the IRA's milk-churn bomb blew up the center of Aughnacloy, he was ten. The bomb also gutted the McAnespie home, a narrow house without running water. The car that brought the bomb came into town honking its horn. "People thought it was a wedding until the driver got out and shouted a warning," Aidan's sister Eilish remembers.

Sammy Brush, a unionist councilman who grew up in Aughnacloy, also remembers that bomb. One of his cousins was the farmer forced to drive it into town while his father was held hostage. Years later the IRA came to get the cousin to drive another bomb. By this time the father was dead, and the farmer escaped by running upstairs and climbing down a rainpipe from the second floor. He has not lived in the house since.

Brush serves part-time as an officer



Catholics dismantling barricades along the border near Aughnacloy

in the Ulster Defense Regiment, a locally recruited, almost exclusively Protestant regiment of the British Army. In addition to its regular army duties, the UDR functions as the army's local eyes and ears and is hated by many Catholics, who see it as a vehicle for vigilantism and bigotry. The first time I talked with Brush he had been up all night at the scene of an IRA bus bombing only a few miles from Aughnacloy. Seven very young soldiers had died with horrible injuries. Another lay fatally wounded. Brush drank his tea and talked for several hours with the detachment of a man in shock.

Brush himself was working as a postman and a part-time soldier in 1981 when two masked IRA men shot him four times one afternoon just after he had delivered a first-class letter down a long country lane. Armed with a Smith & Wesson .38, Brush fired back, hitting one of his attackers, who was later taken into custody in Monaghan and put in a Dublin hospital for treatment. Although the man was under police guard, he escaped. "He skipped," Brush told me. "A relative—some people say it was his sister—changed places with him in the bed, and he went out wearing her clothes."

Brush's predecessor on the mail route, also a Protestant and also a member of the UDR, had given up the job after he was injured by a booby-trap bomb. "I have walked behind at least fifty coffins of good friends," Brush told me.

Like most Protestants here, Brush dismisses the IRA's contention that its intended targets are members of the security forces or those who do business with them. He sees the victims as Protestants—period. "People make a mistake many a time to thinking that because they have a friendly relationship with both Roman Catholics and Protestants that you would, perhaps, be safer because of that," he told me. "It's completely wrong to take that point of view, because it doesn't make any difference."

WHEN THE TROUBLES began, both Catholics and Protestants told me, people in Aughnacloy knew each other to talk to. The sense that something was terribly wrong, something greater than individual injustices, came slowly.

Starting in 1972 the town found itself at the southwestern point of what two Irish priests would soon dub the "triangle of death," in which twenty-seven Catholics were killed in sectarian assassinations, all unsolved, in the space of three years. Marion Bowen, seven months pregnant, and her brothers Seamus and Michael McKenna were blown up by a booby-trap bomb in a house the brothers were repairing. Francis McCaughey, who had bought land for a Gaelic football field, was blown up when he opened the door of his cow barn. His brother-in-law, Owen Boyle, who built a house in a Protestant farming area, was gunned

down while helping his wife do the dishes.

"I wouldn't doubt the army done it," says Winifred Boyle, who was Owen's wife and Francis McCaughey's sister. "We're nearly sure it was the UDR." Local people believe, but cannot prove, that a regiment member from Aughnacloy was among the killers. "Even when you walk down the street, you feel scared, especially at night," says Carmel Boyle, now eighteen. She was three when her father was shot dead in front of her. "When you see the army out there, then you get scared."

"The UDR are the worst," a young man told me. "They're not soldiers. They're bitter toward every Catholic. They're provokers. The IRA keeps them at bay. For that, I'm happy."

The wave of sectarian killings in the murder triangle did indeed stop when the IRA revived its border campaign. But by then many Catholics, especially young men, found themselves suspected of membership in the IRA. And Protestant fear and distrust of Catholics grew.

Kevin O'Brien, a Catholic then working as a machinist, remembers that his Protestant co-workers stopped sharing rides with him. "It was more in atmosphere than anything else: 'I can't take you this morning. Take your own car.' It was subtle, but at the same time, it was effective." Any Catholics who left the company, he said, were replaced with Protestants.

Fear and uncertainty have given rise to much suffering in Aughnacloy. A Catholic whose grandfather had been in the IRA told me that he himself refused to get involved as the Troubles heated up. Then one night in 1975, he said, he and his brother were picked up by the British Army on a road outside town, put into a helicopter, and blindfolded. "And they flew over our own field—I didn't know this till after—and they told us they were going to shoot us and dump us. They wanted to know names of people and what people were doing, blaming us for being in the IRA—'Certainly your grandfather and you're all in it' and all this carry-on—but they were hovering. And I was on my back in the body of the Wessex, and all I could see was the night sky. Every time I'd move my head, I'd get a thump. They were only hovering three feet above the ground, but I couldn't see. They took the



blindfold off me, giving me enough room to see my brother standing on the edge of the helicopter with a blindfold on. I could see him and the two hands behind him. I said, 'I know nothing! I know nothing! I know nothing!' and he just pushed him out. And I let out a roar and pissed myself—I thought he was dead. Next minute I could hear our boy laughing. He says, 'The bastards are in their own field.' They laughed and pushed me out and flew off."

This man told me that he still comes through the checkpoint, and he has

no minister of anything." Cuddy is fifty-two and has lived in Coronation Park for twenty-three years. "I've served in the Royal Air Force nine years, and I'm subject to this treatment because of my religion, nothing else."

A middle-aged Catholic who has lived in the project for nearly forty years agreed to talk to me, but only anonymously. "I own a couple of farms on the other side of the border," he said. "I'm constantly stopped because I go back and forth on the tractor. I have seen others beaten. I even saw a

encounter. The soldiers often threatened to kill him. Eamon Boyle, a family friend, told me he was driving in the country one night with Aidan's father, John McAnespie, when soldiers stopped them at a checkpoint. After looking at John's driver's license, one soldier asked about Aidan, and then said, "You tell him we're gonna get him. You tell him to keep his head down, that we'll definitely get him." "That was a year before they actually done it," Boyle said.

Father Brendan McHugh came to Aughnacloy as the parish priest in 1982, when Aidan was seventeen. "He used to get a lot of harassment," Father McHugh recalls, "and it went on and on and on."

"He came to me at times about the treatment he was getting, the language they were using, what they were threatening at times, because they did threaten, you see, that they would beat him up, that they would shoot him—I'm saying that they did threaten that many times, *many times*, now. At the end, he used to say, 'I know, Father, you're tired of listening to me telling you this,' and I would say, 'Aidan, I know what you're about before you start,' and I would listen to him. I used to tell him to be quiet. 'Answer their questions as far as you think they're entitled to ask them, and just keep on going. And we'll see who has the greatest courage—them or you.' It was my impression, and the impression of a great many others, that they wanted him to run. They would have loved for him to go off to County Monaghan and stay there, out of their way, so to speak. Then they'd have been satisfied. But he didn't do that. He stayed going back and forth. I never expected it would end the way it did."

JUST HOW Aidan McAnespie's life ended is still a mystery. The soldier who was charged, David Jonathan Holder, eighteen years old, told the court that the general-purpose machine gun in question was always loaded with a belt of fifty rounds. That morning two NCOs arrived for inspection and asked Holder about rust on the barrel. He said he was given the gun to clean and oil. Someone else then reloaded it and put it back on its stand, just as Aidan McAnespie started to walk through the checkpoint.

Holder noticed that the gun was



The British Army checkpoint near the Coronation Park housing development

had a rough time of it. "One night they stuck a rifle in my mouth. Told me they were going to blow my head away. And I just laughed at them. What was I going to do? If he was going to shoot me, he was going to shoot me. You tell people that, they won't believe you. 'The police wouldn't do that,' or 'The UDR wouldn't do this.' They have no idea what they do."

The checkpoint itself sits very near a small, cramped public-housing project called Coronation Park, a somewhat ironic name in that the project is inhabited mostly by Catholics, who tend to be Irish nationalists. A camera is trained on the houses, and in the early days the residents could turn on their sets and see themselves on TV.

"We live in an open prison," said Aidan Cuddy, one of the few residents of the project who was willing to speak to me and let his name be used. "Nobody can tell me different, no politician or

groom beaten. There was a wedding, and the bride and groom were pulled in. They beat him up, and the blood spattered all over her white dress, and the whole wedding group was in a state of riot." One of those he saw beaten, he said, was Aidan McAnespie. "I remember once in July, 1987. They pulled him out of the car. I was beside him on a tractor. They took him out of the car and stood on him and pulled his shoes off him and pulled off his sweater. I wasn't close enough to hear what they said. He tried to run to me. I kept shouting, 'That isn't necessary!' I tried to go to him, but they blocked my path."

Aidan McAnespie routinely answered the police and soldiers with silence, and it enraged them. I knew his family, and I can remember Aidan coming into the kitchen of his sister's house, a few minutes from the checkpoint, ashen and shaken after one such

pointing away from the high ground to his left, where attacks generally came from, and decided to move the gun. He lifted it, putting his hand, still wet from the cleaning, over the trigger guard. At that moment, he said, his finger slipped onto the trigger, and the gun went off, firing several bullets. Police investigators told the press that one bullet ricocheted off the road and struck McAnespie.

Under British law the autopsy and all investigative details have been kept secret. As part of the Irish investigation McAnespie's body was exhumed and underwent a second autopsy, conducted by Dr. John Harbison, the Irish state pathologist. The part of the breastbone and rib cage that Harbison most needed, however, was missing. He initially concluded from the shape of the bullet holes that the victim had been shot from the front—not the back—and that the circular entry wound on his chest could not have come from a ricochet. These observations, reported by the McAnespie family doctor, who attended the second au-

topsy, correspond with those of witnesses at the scene, who saw what looked like an indentation and very little blood on McAnespie's chest, and a slightly jagged wound in his back, with a lot of blood. If Irish investigators subsequently concluded, as the *Irish Press* reported, that the bullet ricocheted and the shooting was accidental, it seems likely that Dr. Harbison was given access to the missing part and changed his mind. But neither the Irish government's findings nor the judge's decision to drop charges against the accused soldier have made much difference to people in and around Aughnacloy. The unionists accept without question that it was an accident. The nationalists firmly believe that it was murder.

"I don't believe anything the British authorities tell me at all," says Anthony McGonnell, the chairman of the Killeeshil Gaelic Football Club, which was to play the Aughnacloy club the day McAnespie was killed. "The general consensus would be that Aidan McAnespie was wantonly shot dead."

"Whether this was an accident at Aughnacloy or whether it was a deliberate thing, certainly one sure thing is we'll never know," says Brendan Holland, a Dungannon businessman who heard the shots while driving through the checkpoint. Holland was one of the first witnesses at the scene. "We might be told," he says, "but we'd never believe it. If it was an accident, would anyone believe it, in the light of everything else that's happened? Most people won't."

IF YOU FOLLOW the Ravella road south, across the bridge and the border, you will soon come to Clara, the small town where Elizabeth McAnespie was born. The road ends a few yards from the cemetery at St. Patrick's, where her son is buried.

They chose Clara, the family explains, so that Aidan's brothers could tend his grave. Engraved on his tombstone is the symbol from the SPIRIT OF FREEDOM button he wore: a lark caught in barbed wire.

—Jo Thomas



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