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Devlin Barrett covers national security and law enforcement for The Washington Post. People trying to end a war — even a dirty guerrilla war like the one that gripped Northern Ireland for decades — often say that the terms for peace must honor those who died in the conflict. Wp Get the full experience. Choose your plan ArrowRight “Say Nothing,” Patrick Radden Keefe’s examination of “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, provides a fresh accounting of the moral balance sheet not just for those killed but for those who did the killing.
It is fitting that Keefe, an American writer with Irish ancestry but little connection to the place itself, took up the task. Irish Americans have always played an outsize role in that struggle; first, by supporting the Irish Republican Army financially and politically, when its other main source of funding was bank robberies, and second, through the Clinton administration’s push toward the 1998 peace deal.

The book does not attempt to recount the entirety of the Troubles. Instead, it uses one killing — of Jean McConville, a single mother in Belfast slain by the IRA as a suspected “tout,” or informant — to trace the conflict through the lives and deaths of two very different women.
The book begins with McConville’s killing in 1972, and its central character is one of her killers, Dolours Price. Price was about 20 years old when she joined the IRA, and she quickly proved her worth to the organization at a time when a propensity for violence was most valued.
She robbed banks dressed as a nun, she planted bombs, and she was sentenced to decades in prison for explosions in London. In an era of self-styled revolutionaries, the London bombings gave her a level of notoriety.
McConville, by comparison, lived and died in obscurity. A widow and a mother of 10, McConville struggled in 1972 simply to keep her children clothed and fed. One night, a group of armed men and women came to her apartment and took her away over the protests of her children. She was never seen alive again. Her disappearance was not investigated; the only government action taken at the time was to split up her children and ship them off to a variety of grim, punishing institutions.

Many years later, Price confided that she had driven McConville to her death, and she and two others were tasked with the killing. In Price’s telling, she deliberately missed when it was her turn to fire.
McConville’s body was dumped in a sandy grave, unmarked and undiscovered for decades.
Keefe’s description of McConville’s killing is haunting, and it seems to have haunted her killers. Years later, Price and some of the others who took part are angry, depressed and drinking heavily, as portrayed by Keefe.
Despite their guilt, they seem certain of one thing: that McConville was an informant for the hated British. Keefe is much more skeptical on that point, and such skepticism seems warranted, at least on the available evidence. In 2006, a police ombudsman declared her innocent of any such activity, saying there were no files to suggest she had ever been an informer for the British government. Yet for all the self-loathing voiced by McConville’s killers, they remain determined not to concede that she might have been innocent. Perhaps they know something that remains buried; perhaps their capacity for guilt only goes so far.

The story of Price’s confession is a saga unto itself.
In 2001, a wealthy Irish American businessman paid $200,000 to fund an unusual project — collecting the oral histories of those who had been footsoldiers and terrorists in Northern Ireland’s sectarian violence. The goal was to gather the accounts of those like Price, who fought to unite the island, as well as the accounts of the loyalists who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom.
The main impediment to the project, its backers realized quickly, was that all the ex-gunmen and women knew that talking could get them killed. So they offered a condition: Interviews would not become public until the deaths of those who participated.

Among the former IRA members, those who spoke for the project were largely those disenchanted with the direction of Sinn Fein, the IRA's political arm. Price and others had come to feel that the terms of the Good Friday accord were insultingly meager.

"For what Sinn Fein has achieved today, I would not have missed a good breakfast," she said in a radio interview. "Volunteers didn't only die. Volunteers had to kill, as well, you know?"

In private conversations, she laid the blame on her former commanding officer in the IRA, Gerry Adams. A scruffy terrorism suspect in the 1970s, Adams had by the 1990s transformed himself into a prominent politician who denied ever being a member of the IRA. By the time of the Good Friday agreement, even Bill Clinton struggled to know just what to make of Adams and his past, saying, "I don't know what the real deal is between him and the IRA." To Keefe, the public uncertainty surrounding Adams's past is what made the transition to peace possible; those who did not want to be seen as negotiating with a terrorist could say he wasn't one.

To Price and some of her compatriots, Adams's new respectability meant he had sold out, given what he had once ordered them to do. It seemed a sick joke that the man who allegedly gave the order to kill McConville would declare, decades later, that her disappearance should be fully investigated. In Keefe's telling, Adams's insistence of innocence had a debilitating effect on the executioners — they alone would bear the silent moral burden of her killing and the killings of others.

And so Price and others spoke in secret to the Boston College history project. Their cooperation began spilling out in 2010, with the publication of a book featuring the accounts of two of the participants, and a subsequent conversation Price had with an Irish reporter. With that, Northern Irish police detectives began to demand access to records that could crack old, unsolved killings like that of McConville. After a lengthy battle in the U.S. courts, the detectives were able to review the oral history project's accounts of McConville's death. Adams was brought in for questioning, but without a confession there was apparently insufficient evidence to take him to court.

When Price died in 2013 of a toxic combination of medications, Adams did not attend the funeral — he was no longer welcome in the circles of violent Irish republicanism. By then Adams was a member of Parliament in the Republic of Ireland and the leader of Sinn Fein, which he had steered away from its IRA affiliation into a more traditional political party. But another major figure from the Troubles, Bernadette Devlin, spoke at her graveside. Her oration captured the sense of exhaustion that helped end the war.

"We cannot keep pretending forty years of cruel war, of loss, of sacrifice, of prison, of inhumanity, has not affected each and every one of us in heart and soul and spirit," Devlin said. "It broke our hearts, and it broke our bodies. It changed our perspectives, and it makes every day hard."

As a cautionary tale, "Say Nothing" speaks volumes — about the zealotry of youth, the long-term consequences of violence and the politics of forgetting.

Say Nothing
By Patrick Radden Keefe
Doubleday. 441 pp. $28.95

Summary:

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the only government action taken at the time was to split up her children and ship them off to a variety of grim, punishing institutions. In Price's telling, she deliberately missed when it was her turn to fire. McConville's body was dumped in a sandy grave, unmarked and undiscovered for decades. Despite their guilt, they seem certain of one thing: that McConville was an informant for the hated British. In 2006, a police ombudsman declared her innocent of any such activity, saying there were no files to suggest she had ever been an informer for the British government. Yet for all the self-loathing voiced by McConville's killers, they remain determined not to concede that she might have been innocent. So they offered a condition: Interviews would not become public until the deaths of those who participated. But another major figure from the Troubles, Bernadette Devlin, spoke at her graveside.