

The Birmingham Six following their release at the Old Bailey in London



The Birmingham Six following their release at the Old Bailey in London. Photo: Denis Minihane

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A quarter of a century after their release, the Birmingham Six still live with the impact of their jailing, writes **Michael Clifford**

It was twenty five years ago today that they walked out, blinking, into freedom. They had spent sixteen and a half years incarcerated for something they didn't do. Some of them had endured hard, hard years in British prisons, extended periods in solitary, long years despised by some elements as murderers of twenty one innocent people.

A crowd was waiting for them outside the Old Bailey, the symbol of British justice, which had for centuries evoked pride in a people who value their own sense of fair play.

On March 14 1991, the cries went up as the six, Paddy Joe Hill, Richard McIlkenny, Hugh Callaghan, Gerry Hunter, John Walker and Bill Power, came through the doors. The crowd there to greet them were swelled by passers by, construction workers in nearby sites, and not a few who were just satisfying a curiosity about a case that had for years by then achieved the status of cause celebre.

Paddy Joe Hill addressed those present with the kind of emotion that draws on a reservoir built up through sixteen years of anger and gut wrenching pain.

“The police told us from the start that they knew we hadn’t done it,” he roared. “They knew we hadn’t done it. They told us they didn’t care who had done it and that we were selected and they were going to frame us just to keep the people in there happy.”

His arm now waving at the Old Bailey, he went on. “Justice, I don’t think those people in there have the intelligence to spell the world, never mind dispense it. They’re rotten.”

The tears flowed through clenched fists. Justice was theirs at last, but what had it cost? The stolen years behind bars, separated from loved ones, prevented from developing in life, was one thing. But the years ahead would not be theirs either, continually haunted by what might have been.

The Birmingham pub bombs exploded at a time when Britain was under attack from the IRA.

For the eighteen months preceding the attacks on November 21 1974, bombs had gone off across southern England as the Provos brought their war across the Irish Sea.

At 8.11pm on the night in question, a call was made to the offices of the Birmingham Post&Mail.

“There is a bomb planted at the Rotunda, there is a bomb planted in New Street at the tax office,” the caller said, providing an accepted code word. Immediately the police were contacted, but there wasn’t time to access and evacuate.

The two bombs went off at the Mulberry Bush pub and the Tavern in the Town, roughly but not precisely at the location mentioned in the warning call. A third device failed to detonate.

Twenty one people were killed and around 180 injured. It was at the time the worst atrocity in the UK during peacetime.

That same evening five of the six Irishmen who would be framed for the atrocity were on a train to take them to the boat for a trip back to Belfast. The sixth, Hugh Callaghan, saw them off at New Street station in the city. All had been living in Birmingham for years, some for decades. Five were from Belfast. John Walker was a native of Derry.

They were returning for the funeral of an IRA man who had been killed while planting a bomb in Coventry the previous week, as most knew the man’s family from Belfast. That fact would be held against them when they were eventually tried.

While they were stopped for a routine security check at Heysham, word came through of the bombings. The men were detained on a cautionary basis, but within twelve hours they were handed over to the West Midlands Police, an outfit that would go on to have a notorious reputation.

Over the following weeks, as the British police were put under severe pressure to get the culprits, the six were subjected to savage beatings, until such time as four of them signed statements implicating all six.

In an interview on RTE Radio two weeks ago, Paddy Joe Hill recalled one occasion during his detention when the policeman pulled out his firearm and pushed it into his mouth.

“He said, I’m going to count, to three. One, he pulled back the hammer, two and then on the count of three he pulled the trigger back and I can still see it going back, it seemed to take ages and then I heard the click He pulled it out and hit me on the head with the gun and did the same thing again, one two three and pulled the trigger. The third time he did it he stuck the gun into my left eye and he said either you do it this time (make a statement) or you’re dead.”

All the men told similar tales. The verdicts in their trial were a foregone conclusion. It was as if the whole state apparatus from police through to the legal system and the judiciary had elected to turn a blind eye to justice because circumstances demanded that somebody, anybody, must pay a price for a heinous crime. All were sentenced to life in prison.

The attitude of the British authorities to the six was best summed up by Lord Denning who heard an application for the men to appeal their convictions for the second time in 1980.

“If the six men win, it will mean that the police were guilty of perjury, that they were guilty of violence and threats, that the confessions were involuntary and were improperly admitted in evidence and that the convictions were erroneous,” he said.

“That would mean the Home Secretary would either have to recommend they be pardoned or he would have to remit the case to the Court of Appeal. This is such an appalling vista that every sensible person in the land would say: It cannot be right these actions should go any further. This case shows what a civilised country we are.”

In reality, the appalling vista had come to pass. Denning and all his ilk were simply unable to accept that their misplaced confidence in the system was wholly unwarranted.

As the years wore on the truth began to seep out. The case of the Birmingham Six was taken up by Chris Mullen, a British Labour party MP whose interest in the case had been awoken. He had no connection to the men, and precious little to Ireland, but Mullen more than anybody was responsible for blowing open the appalling miscarriage of justice. At a time when many in the Irish establishment and media were cautious of tackling anything that could possibly smell of another Provo propaganda campaign, Mullen went where others simply would not until such time as the truth became to come obvious.

Momentum increased after the release of the Guildford Four in 1989, a group whose experience mirrored that of the six. It took another eighteen months, however, before the British authorities could swallow the grave injustice which had been perpetrated.

Since their release the men have received monetary compensation varying from £800,000 to £2 million, but there are some injuries that simply cannot be healed by money. All have referred at one stage or another to the impact that the whole ordeal had had on their lives.

Speaking earlier this year, Hugh Callaghan said that he still had nightmares about the beatings.

“It was a terrible ordeal for me and for us and for our families,” he said.

“I am very angry. The beatings were terrible. I remember one time I said to Gerry Hunter, ‘I think they are going to kill us’ and he said, ‘I think you might be right’.

“People don’t realise that the whole world was against us, even the other prisoners. It was deadly and now to think they may have known all along that we were innocent.”

Earlier this month, Paddy Joe Hill told Ray Darcy on RTE Radio One that the men had been diagnosed as suffering from the highest level of post traumatic stress disorder, higher than most combat veterans.

“One minute you’re alright and the next minute you’re on your knees crying your eyes out and you don’t know what you’re crying about. I’ve learned to look after myself. I realised years ago we were on our own. I manage myself.”

The case did lead the British authorities to review the system which led to the setting up of the Criminal Cases Review Act, which facilitates a second look at cases where new evidence comes to light.

The policemen who were involved in the detention, assault and framing of the Birmingham Six were never prosecuted.

## **WHERE ARE THEY NOW?**

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### **HUGH CALLAGHAN**

He lost his family as a result of his detention on his struggles to come to terms with life afterwards. He eventually settled in London and penned a book on his story, *Cruel Fate*. Now 85, he lives with his new partner, Adeline whom he credits for “saving” him.

### **JOHN WALKER**

He lives in a remote part of Donegal with his second wife, with whom he has a son. Now 79, he rarely comments on the case.

### **RICHARD MCILKENNY**

The father of six returned to Ireland soon after his release and he lived in Dublin with his wife right up until his death from cancer in 2006.

### **PADDY JOE HILL**

Now 71, Paddy Joe Hill lives on a 20 acre farm in Ayreshire, Scotland with his second wife. He has had great difficulty coming to terms with life after his imprisonment, and says that he has practically no relationship with his six children since he came out of prison. He has been one of the main movers behind the Miscarriages of Justice Organisation, which campaigns in cases where a miscarriage is believed to have occurred.

### **BILL POWER**

Like Paddy Joe Hill he had major issues around bonding with his children after he came out of prison. While he lives a quiet life in London, the 71-year-old did become involved two years ago in a

campaign to block legislation in the UK which would make it more difficult for those who have been wronged to seek compensation.

## **GERRY HUNTER**

Now 71, he lives on the Algarve in Portugal. In an interview a few years ago he described how he has moved on. "I learned in prison that hate and bitterness will only destroy you," he said.

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<https://www.irishexaminer.com/viewpoints/columnists/michael-clifford/it-is-25-years-since-the-birmingham-six-were-released-from-prison-387162.html>

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