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Book Review - Patrick Radden Keefe, Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland (New York: Doubleday, 2019)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Patrick Radden Keefe, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 2019).

John Mulrooney

Dundalk is a midsize town on the mouth of the Castletown River. It boasts the Patrick Kavanaugh center that celebrates the life and work of its namesake poet and one of Ireland's finest portal tombs, the Proleek Dolmen, located on the grounds of the Ballymascanlon Hotel and which dates to the Neolithic period. But Dundalk has played a crucial role in more recent history as well. In terms of the island of Ireland, it is slightly northernish but centrally located on the coast of the Irish Sea. In 1921, the partition of Ireland made Dundalk a border town. And when, in the late 1960s, the unresolved circumstances of that partition exploded into what became known as "The Troubles," it then became a central supply route of weapons and personnel and a refuge for republican fighters seeking to avoid capture in Northern Ireland, where most of the fighting took place. It was also to the outskirts of Dundalk that 16 people were brought to be "disappeared," among them Jean McConville, a Belfast mother of ten.

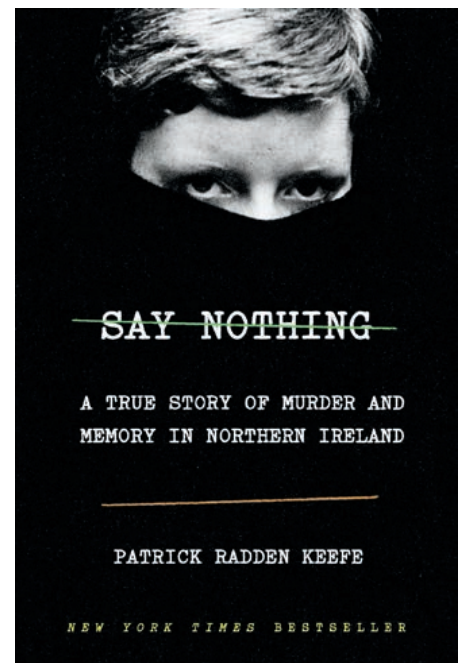
This history is recent and it is perhaps because of, rather than in spite of this fact, that making sense of it can seem as murky and speculative as any work done by archeologists on a dig. And this is the task that Patrick Radden Keefe tackles in *Say Nothing*, a brilliant new multi-tiered book that deals with old wounds and is unafraid to perhaps open a few new ones. The product of ten years of research, this gripping narrative is infused with an urgency and relevance its author could hardly have anticipated. The looming prospect of Brexit, and the implications for the

Irish border, threatens to undo much of the Good Friday, or Belfast Agreement, the 1998 peace treaty that brought an end to most of the violence. Dundalk's status as a wartime border town may yet be revived.

There are many great books about the Troubles, some that tell white-knuckle tales, and others that deal with the agonizing complexity of the conflict, offering outsiders a way to penetrate the often opaque minutiae that accompanies "the narcissism of small differences." But very few have integrated

a full reckoning of this crisis without sacrificing the edge-of-your seat spy story quality to which such material so readily lends itself. This may be Keefe's principal achievement. It is certainly the mechanism which allows the book's other fine attributes to function. *Say Nothing* is a page-turner that would serve anyone as a thorough primer on the conflict in Northern Ireland. Keefe weaves three stories together in an episodic back-and-forth, two from the heady days when bombings were a part of everyday life in Belfast, and a more recent tale that explores how fraught legacy issues can become.

In late November of 1972, Jean McConville was taken from her apartment in Belfast's Divis Flats housing project in front of her children, who recognized the voices of her masked assailants. They were neighbors. Her body would not be recovered until a storm exposed her partial remains in 2003. While McConville's children struggled in their unempowered state to find her, IRA operative Dolours Price rose to radical chic celebrity in the wake of her involvement in the



bombing of London's Old Bailey. It was Price who drove McConville over the border. We know this now because of a series of tapes archived at Boston College by journalist Ed Moloney and a team of oral historian/participants. Keefe weaves in and out of each of these tales deftly. His book is almost deceptively integrated – each story would be compelling on its own. Collectively they rise to a cinematic climax.

The sectarian violence that devastated the province for almost thirty years was always in sync with an equally fierce war of words and definitions. What constituted a legitimate target or action not only served to bolster the fighter's sense of identity but also eased moral qualms about the ramifications of what was being done in the name of "protecting" one's community. If, as both communities claimed, their paramilitary forces were engaged in

Library have taken their lumps and Keefe does not spare them wholly. But *Say Nothing* gives us a complex picture, a litany of unforced errors in which the promises made by Moloney and his team were never fully vetted on either end, and probably always too ambitious, too good to be true. This is tricky navigation for Keefe, as his book owes much to Moloney and the interviews he compiled over many years both in and out of the BC project. Keefe honors his source without being afraid to question it.

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His agility as a writer is most on display in the narrow, zeroing in on detail such as he does with the story of IRA Belfast Brigade commander Brendan Hughes' alias as a toy salesman, or following through the thread of the nappy pin Mary McConville wore when she was taken. It is so readable that one might forget just how central the mystery of Jean McConville has been to the conflict and current state of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Price, who has since passed, made a taped confession to Moloney that implicated Gerry Adams as her commanding officer and indicated she killed McConville on his orders. Adams, the leader of republican party Sinn Féin for 35 years, and one of the principal architects of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement has long maintained that he was never a member of the IRA nor was he involved in any paramilitary activity.

acts of war, then the rules of war should apply. Disappearances then, more associated with right-wing death squads than freedom fighters or legitimate armies, present a big problem. They are war crimes.

Keefe illustrates how delicate the definitions are – in legal and political terms yes – but also in the more emotional terrain of identity. His sensitivity to the corners some of his subjects feel themselves to be in are mirrored in some of the deft moves he makes himself.

The mismanagement of the Boston College Belfast Project has set back not only the Northern Irish peace process, but also that of peace processes around the world. Mediators in similar conflicts in the Balkans and Lebanon and elsewhere have been given pause by the crumbling of BC's Belfast Project. Boston College and the Byrnes

The urge to tell, the desire to come clean, can be seductive. It can be motivated by remorse, a desire to set the moral compass straight, no matter what personal consequences might befall. It almost always comes with a risk, both for the listener and the talker. It is so seductive, perhaps because it is where who we are emerges out of who we were. But after years of saying nothing, when we move to finally say something, we find there is still much work to be done. *Say Nothing* speaks volumes to that realization.



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