

# THE READER

A publication of the McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute

## Making 'Hope and History Rhyme'

A talk by David Blevins

### INTRODUCTION

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word: Ireland? Most people think the shamrock is our national symbol. It isn't. The harp is. The colour originally associated with Saint Patrick wasn't green. It was blue. And much to our disappointment, everyone isn't Irish on Saint Patrick's Day. The Northern Ireland - I'll explain the difference in a moment - punches way above its weight. Belfast has to be the only city in the world to have constructed an entire tourist industry around the fact that it built a ship that sank: Titanic. Now, to be fair, of the other ships we launched in the same year, five lasted 30 years, nine lasted 50 years and one, the Nomadic, turned 100 in 2011.

So the defence, printed on the t-shirts at the Titanic visitor experience in Belfast, stands: "She was fine when she left here." These days, there's less talk of shamrocks and shipbuilding and more talk of golf and drama. Rory McIlroy doesn't hail from Hollywood, California. He hails from Hollywood, a town east of Belfast. And we've gone from producing ships to producing world-class television shows like Game of Thrones. Northern Ireland - has been utterly transformed by "the peace process." It is, without question, our greatest achievement. We had a history but we also had a hope. In the words of one of our finest poets, we made hope and history rhyme. Those concepts - hope, history and rhyme - have become the touchstones of our story and my story.

### OUR HISTORY

At the risk of patronising you, let me explain that the island is divided in two. There are 26 counties in "Ireland" - an independent country - often just called "the Republic." There are six counties in "Northern Ireland," part of the United Kingdom. You think it's good that they named New York twice? We've got five names: 'Eire', 'Ireland', 'Northern Ireland and the Republic', 'the Island of Ireland' and 'the Emerald Isle.' In the Republic, Catholics are in the majority. In Northern Ireland, Protestants are in the majority. Now, fasten

your seat belt for the shortest history lesson ever. Patrick had been a slave in Ireland but felt called back, so he returned with Christianity and education. It's called "the land of saints and scholars." When Vikings invaded, Ireland sought help from England but the English overstayed their welcome. Cue the charming King Henry the Eighth. He didn't have any Irish wives to chop the head off so he chopped the head off the Catholic Church instead.

England crushed Ireland's resistance, confiscated the land and sent 10,000 Protestant Scots to settle in the north. A territorial dispute had become a religious dispute. That was 800 years in 100 words.

1916 was the year of the uprising. The Irish rebels who led it were executed. But by 1921, the British had agreed to divide Ireland. Violent republicans continued their attempt to bomb and shoot the British out altogether. The most recent phase of the conflict (1968-1998) claimed 3,600 lives, from a population of just 1.8 million people in Northern Ireland. Outlawed groups like the Irish Republican Army claimed 2,000 lives. Loyalist groups claimed 1,000. British security forces killed at least 350. It was a dark chapter, summed up in the words of the song: 'Sunday, Bloody Sunday.' You may have heard of a small band called U2. "Broken bottles under children's feet, Bodies strewn across the dead end street, But I won't heed the battle call, It puts my back up, Puts my back up against the wall." Did you catch the juxtaposition? To some, it was a "battle call," a freedom fight. To others, it was a "dead end street", cold-blooded murder, terrorism. Bono, the lead singer, was prophetic when he questioned "the glory in the revolution" long before it had been consigned to history.

### OUR HOPE

I'll never forget the DJ's cue: "We're interrupting this programme for a newflash. It's a momentous day and David Blevins is at the news-desk." I've still got the script. "Breaking news in the last few minutes, the IRA has declared a complete and unequivocal ceasefire."

### DAVID BLEVINS



David Blevins, the Ireland Correspondent for Sky News, spoke at The King's College in New York City in October, 2015, on the role of the media in Northern Ireland's peace process.

A reporter with the London-based cable news network for nearly 18 years, Blevins grew up in Northern Ireland during the conflict and witnessed first-hand the region's inspirational journey from war to peace. He reported the IRA and loyalist paramilitary ceasefires, the brokering of the historic Good Friday Agreement and the establishment of power-sharing government. He was nominated for the Royal Television Society Award for his coverage of the worst single atrocity of the conflict, the bombing of Omagh, in which 29 people were killed.

Blevins has an undergraduate Diploma in Journalism, a post-graduate Degree in Theology and a keen interest in the reporting on faith issues, particularly in places where religion has been an element of the conflict. He is married to Ruth and they have three children.





David Blevins speaks to members of the audience after his talk at The King's College in New York City.

## “IN THE WORDS OF ONE OF OUR FINEST POETS, WE MADE HOPE AND HISTORY RHYME.”

Can you imagine the hope those few words brought for a radio news-anchor who'd grown up in an area known as “the murder triangle?” Two months later, the loyalists reciprocated. For the first time in my lifetime, the scene was set for peace talks. It took another four years for our hope to become reality. The Irish poet, WB Yeats, wasn't wrong in 1888, when he penned the words: “And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow.” Our eldest child, Sarah, was born in February 1998. Two months later, they brokered the Good Friday Agreement. Sarah's 17 years old now. She and her younger brothers, James and Josh, have grown up in a very different Northern Ireland. Our minds were filled with pictures of bombs and bullets from the six o'clock news. Their minds are filled with pictures of Ed Sheeran and Taylor Swift from Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

Who brought us hope? John Hume – the leader of moderate nationalism, he's described as “the architect of the peace process.” He famously said he didn't give “two balls of roasted snow” what sceptics thought of his decision to bring the IRA in from the cold.

David Trimble – the first pro-British Unionist leader with the courage to share power with Irish Republicans. Hume and Trimble shared the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1998.

Gerry Adams – Sinn Fein leader for more than 30 years, he persuaded the republican movement to pursue its objective politically.

Tony Blair – they're still debating his legacy, and Iraq is another issue, but he spent more time in Northern Ireland than any other British Prime Minister in history.

And perhaps most of all, US Senator George Mitchell – the man who chaired peace talks. America rewarded him with the Presidential Medal and the Liberty Medal. On receipt of the latter, he said: “I believe there's no such thing as a conflict that can't be ended. They're created and sustained by human beings. They can be ended by human beings. No matter how ancient the conflict, no

matter how hateful, no matter how hurtful, peace can prevail.” That's a definition of hope.

## OUR RHYME

How did we, in the media, make our hope and our history rhyme? Our contribution was three-fold. Firstly, we ensured every voice was heard. At the height of the conflict, British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, imposed a broadcast ban on Gerry Adams. We circumvented the law by hiring an actor to voice his words. We didn't endorse his position. We just ensured there was balance. Secondly, we read between the lines. The two sides didn't just disagree on the solution, they disagreed on the problem. Each came with its own version of history. Consensus required creative thinking – a broad political document. Journalists analysed it meticulously to help people make an informed decision ahead of the referendum. We didn't try to influence the vote. We just tried to be accurate. Thirdly, we found space for good news. It's easy to obtain a sound-bite from those with the most extreme views. They tend to shout the loudest. So we made an effort to find those with more moderate views – Catholics and Protestants who were reaching out beyond the traditional boundaries. And we ensured our young people – the next generation – were given a pen or a microphone to make their contribution.

Every time we think our rhyme is finished, Northern Ireland writes another line. We thought the ceasefires were the pinnacle until the Good Friday Agreement. We thought the Agreement was the pinnacle until paramilitaries decommissioned their weapons. We thought decommissioning was the pinnacle until the two most diametrically opposed parties emerged from election as the largest and incredibly, agreed to share power. Queen Elizabeth became the first British monarch to visit the Irish Republic. Her Majesty has played an active part in the peace process. Earlier this year, her son, Prince Charles, shook hands with Gerry Adams and visited the place where the IRA had murdered his Great Uncle, Lord Mountbatten. The unthinkable has not just become the thinkable but the do-able. There have been setbacks. Dissident republicans still pose a threat;

we still witness periods of civil unrest, usually over flags or parades; and despite the political agreement, the reconciliation of people in hard-line areas has been painfully slow. But the process, that has brought us 20 years of fragile peace now, continues to be held up as an example for other places, not least the Middle East.

## MY HISTORY

Now, let me share a little of my own personal story. I've been a journalist for 25 years – a short time in print, five years in radio and the remainder in television. Well, in multi-media to be accurate.

It's been an absolute privilege to witness Northern Ireland's transition from conflict to peace and to share that with the world – a potential audience of 100 million people, watching Sky News in 50 countries. Which stories impacted me most? The Shankill bombing – 10 people died in that explosion. It was my first shift as a radio reporter. The Omagh bombing – 29 people died, one of them pregnant with twins. Her mother and 18-month-old daughter were also killed – three generations of one family. I went on air at five o'clock in the afternoon and didn't come off until midnight. The Holy Cross dispute – on the day before 9/11, I was broadcasting from a protest at a school in Belfast when a bomb exploded 100 yards behind me. And the Good Friday Agreement – we worked 48 hours straight, right through the night and into a second day. The sense of history was palpable and none of us wanted to miss the moment.

World leaders have been queuing up to be associated with the peace process. Northern Ireland – tiny Northern Ireland – hosted the G8 summit two years ago. The result is that I'm honoured to have interviewed two American Presidents, three Irish Presidents, four British Prime Ministers and five Irish Prime Ministers. Who left the greatest impression? None of the above. It was the ordinary people who showed extraordinary courage during the conflict. People like Gordon Wilson, whose only daughter Marie died in the IRA bombing of Enniskillen on Remembrance Sunday.

He said: "I have lost my daughter, and we shall miss her, but I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. I shall pray for those people tonight and every night." I'm not embarrassed to tell you that I've sat with people and cried. The tears ran down my face when Juliet Turner sang 'Broken Things' at a memorial service in Omagh, one week after the bombing there. You don't have to switch off your mind or your heart to be objective. If you do, you can't be authentic. It wasn't just Ireland's history. It was my history.

## MY HOPE

Where did I find my hope? I found it in my faith. My parents were people of hope; Christian, Protestant, evangelical. When I was just 12, my father died of cancer. To say I was angry would be an understatement but by the age of 18, my rebellion was over and I'd embraced their Christian hope. Soon afterwards, I had a sense of calling to the ordained ministry of the church. I told my mother I felt like the prophet Samuel, that God would never stop calling until I answered. But a wise old Methodist minister gave me some good advice. "Go and do something else," he said, "and if it's the call of God, you will never out-run Him." The something else I did was journalism. I spent the next 18 years reporting the peace process and attempting to out-run God. In 2006, He finally caught up with me. During a visit to Africa, that sense of calling returned. Shortly after I returned home, an old friend rang to say he'd been praying for me and felt God had given him some words. They came from First Samuel, chapter three, verse six: "Again the Lord called Samuel."

So I left Sky News and spent three years studying Theology. You can imagine the reaction of the Irish media: 'Journalist quits screen for pulpit'. The headlines were fascinating. In the Irish context, a journalist can talk about most things: their ethnicity, their sexuality, even their politics. Just don't mention the 'r' word: religion. The conflict had given religion a bad name long before the clerical abuse scandal. Both parts of the island have become much more pluralist and secular. Last May, Ireland – yes, "Catholic Ireland" – became the first country in the world to legalise



From left to right: Roberta Ahmanson, writer and philanthropist; David Blevins, Dr. Greg Thornbury, President of The King's College; Terry Mattingly, journalist & senior fellow in media and religion at The King's College



David Blevins speaks to Hannah Smith, Photographer and writer, after his talk at The King's College in New York City.

same-sex marriage by popular vote. No one uses the term “Christian journalist” in Ireland. It’s an oxymoron. Most regard journalism as something secular; religion as something sacred. They don’t read enough C.S. Lewis. Don’t let anyone tell you nothing good ever came out of Belfast. ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’ came out of Belfast. He said, “There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him.” Everything can be sacred. It took me a long time to learn that I didn’t have to separate my history and my hope.

## MY RHYME

In a sense, I had to write my own personal rhyme. Shortly before I graduated with a degree in Theology, I agreed to take on a part-time ministry role with the Methodist Church. Twenty-four hours later, Sky News invited me to return and I agreed but on a part-time basis. For four years, I worked part-time in the ministry and part-time in the media. The marriage of the two occurred 18 months ago, when I returned to Sky News full-time. The penny had finally dropped. The two things – journalism and religion – are not mutually exclusive.

God wasn’t calling me to the ordained ministry. He was calling me to live out my faith in the media – to gather the news ethically and to report it with integrity. “There is more to journalism than accuracy but there never less,” to quote Terry Mattingly, a man who knew U2 before they were famous. We need reporters who can answer the God question in journalistic terms, not religious terms. In short, we need reporters who get religion. When Islamic jihad is posing a threat in the land of Saint Patrick, a journalist who doesn’t get religion doesn’t get the biggest story of this generation.

Journalists who don’t get religion stick out like a sore thumb in Belfast. They say things like, “Prayers were said for the Protestant victim.” Protestants don’t pray for the dead in Northern Ireland. Journalists who do get religion have made an enormous contribution to peace: ensuring every voice is heard; questioning opinion that’s presented as fact; giving truth priority over political correctness. AW Tozer said: “Let every

man abide in the calling wherein he is called and his work will be as sacred as the work of ministry. It’s not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular. It is why he does it.” Why do I do it? Because Ireland needs reporters who get religion; reporters who understand that others come with a different worldview; and reporters who let their journalism do the talking. It’s never been so important in Ireland, now that stories about marriage, abortion, euthanasia – and not sectarian conflict – are topping our news agenda too.

Journalism was my history, Theology expressed my hope so I suppose a journalism that gets religion could be described as my rhyme and I’m finally reciting it in a place at peace.

## CONCLUSION

War correspondents – that’s effectively what we were – tend to thrive on danger. Sometimes, people ask if I’m disappointed there’s less violence to report on my beat now. Let me assure you, there’s nothing I’d rather be reporting than the dawn of peace in the place I call “home.” It didn’t unfold in the corridors of power at Parliament Buildings in Belfast. It came from the ground up, from Catholics and Protestants who’d reached out to each other and discovered in the process that they weren’t that different. The firebrand Unionist, the Rev Ian Paisley, and former IRA commander, Martin McGuinness, not only shared power, they became friends and were pictured laughing together so often, they were nicknamed “the chuckle brothers.” What united these ancient enemies? They spent enough time together to discover that the other might not be a monster after all. We must do more to enable the two communities to spend time together. My son James spent the month of July in Kansas – Catholic and Protestant teens were taking part in something called ‘The Ulster Project.’ It’s built on the premise of ‘peace by piece.’ We need America to keep pushing for integrated education in Northern Ireland.

Why should you do that? Because 45 million people in the United States claim they’re Irish. The population of Ireland – all of Ireland

– is 4.5 million. That means there are 10 times more Irish people in America, than in Ireland. Nineteen of the 44 U.S. Presidents have claimed Irish ancestry – from John F Kennedy, whose family made it from Wexford to the White House in the space of a generation – to Barack Obama, the great, great, great, great, great grandson of a cobbler from Moneygall. He dropped by for a Guinness two years ago.

And that’s fine by us. Ireland is the land of ‘cead mile failte’ [cade meela faltia] – a hundred thousand welcomes. You’ll be “taken” by the home of Liam Neeson – do you see what I did there? So don’t let the facts cloud your green-tinted spectacles. You will find shamrocks there, you will find the most breath-taking landscape and you will find a good party on St. Patrick’s Day. It’s a place fulfilling the prophecy of the late Seamus Heaney: “History says, Don’t hope; On this side of the grave; But then, once in a lifetime; The longed-for tidal wave; Of justice can rise up; And hope and history rhyme.”



### The Reader is a publication of The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute

The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute (MPJI) is based at The King’s College in New York City. MPJI provides education, training and professional development projects for journalists at the high school, undergraduate and professional levels. It is named after the late John McCandlish Phillips, a legendary reporter at *The New York Times*.

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