

PHILIP METRES

To Change the Script

Alan McBride, Gerry Adams, and Five Minutes of Heaven

“THERE ARE TWO NORTHERN IRELANDS,” Alan McBride says, after we’ve settled into our seats in the main room at the WAVE Trauma Centre, welcomed with the customary tea and cookies. Recently, he says, at an event for visiting business leaders, he sat through a fantastical promotional video of Northern Ireland. It featured a sunny Northern Ireland (they must have filmed on the one sunny day that year), horses running along a beautiful beach, a scene from the gorgeous Crown Bar, testimonies from Rory McIlroy and other white-toothed celebrities, and dazzling drone-height images of the Titanic Centre. As the lights went up after the video, he turned to someone and joked, “I would love to go there on holiday.”

BUT THERE’S ANOTHER Northern Ireland, and that’s why we’re here to talk with McBride. We’ve come from our university in the United States to study the country’s long road to peace, one that began in the midst of the Troubles, that thirty-year period of civil strife, terrorism, revolutionary violence, and sectarianism that led to the deaths of 4,000 people and hundreds of thousands of victims. McBride is one of them—or *was* a victim. Can one stop being a victim? He’s dressed in a maroon pullover and blue oxford shirt, his sandy blond hair ceding to gray, blue-green eyes a bit tired behind thick brown glasses, a light beard around his jaw. Mostly, he passes as a well-adjusted denizen of the international middle class. The Troubles are still part of his memory, as well as many other people’s. Intergenerational trauma persists. “Sad to say,” McBride says, “a lot of those communities haven’t really moved on.”

Founded in 1991 by victims of the Troubles, WAVE is located in a beautiful, multistory stone building, tucked on a hillock surrounded by trees, in a suburban area of Belfast. In this building, with its redoubtable stone and the surrounding peace of green, it’s hard to imagine the violence that troubled this country. Today the organization—whose

acronym stands for Widows (and Widowers) Against Violence Empower—offers a range of services, including therapy, welfare, group support, and even storytelling. McBride began his association with WAVE as a victim, but these days he works with young people who don't seem to have any hope. Suicide among youth is suddenly a serious problem. Today, he tells us, “Northern Ireland has twice the rate of suicide of any other place in the United Kingdom.”

McBride's first memories, growing up on a loyalist housing estate in North Belfast, were of the Troubles. In 1971, as the Troubles boiled over, his father joined the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), one of the pro-British paramilitaries that grew up as a response to the rioting and societal chaos. Many men in the estate joined the UDA because they feared that the Irish Republican Army—or indeed, any Catholic—would attack. They did not trust that either the police or even the British Army could keep them safe, so the UDA set up checkpoints in the neighborhood and began to oversee all aspects of local security and justice.

Without getting lost in the long and sometimes convoluted history of Northern Ireland, one can locate the origins of the Troubles as rooted in two communities whose narratives both cast themselves as victims or vulnerables in a history of violence. For those identifying as Protestant (or Unionists or Loyalists), this narrative was one of fear based on past attacks by native Irish, going back into the seventeenth century. Having arrived as planters beginning in the sixteenth century, they were vulnerable to local attacks. Their so-called siege mentality reached its apotheosis in the 1689–1690 Siege of Derry, where thousands of Protestants holed up in the walled fortress starved to death before the survivors were rescued by the victorious William of Orange. As a minority community ruling a majority one, Protestants constantly feared for their safety, wondering when the masses would rise up against them. And the masses did, repeatedly, though it wasn't until 1918 that their will and power was enough to cause the British Empire to relent and grant a modified version of self-governance. When the British carved Northern Ireland out of the Irish Free State in 1921 to protect their interests and the Protestants of the North, the Catholic minority (about 33 percent of Northern Ireland's population at the time) seethed against its minority status. The Irish Republic maintained within its constitution its claim on “the North,” and Protestant Unionists—who ruled the country with an iron fist against Catholic

claims—fiercely opposed any Irish nationalist attempts at gaining power. Most symbols of Catholic Irish culture were banned in the new country. Even the Catholic civil rights movement in the late 1960s—which called for “one man, one vote” and other radical ideas—was perceived as a Trojan horse to overthrow Protestant governance. The vicious response to civil rights marches, and the rioting that ensued, led to the Troubles, the suspension of local government, and the arrival of the British Army.

Five years into the Troubles, in 1974, Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party fomented a worker’s strike to oppose a power-sharing agreement that was signed in Sunningdale. They saw it as a surrendering of their power and status in the society, and feared that nationalists would find a way to undermine their government. The strike broke the will of Sunningdale. It would take another twenty-five years of bloodshed and thousands more victims—including McBride—before the conflict would end. (Seamus Mallon, one of the political leaders of the Social Democrat Labour Party, would come to call the Good Friday Accords “Sunningdale for slow learners.”)

McBride tells us, with refreshing directness, that he grew up in a bigoted household. His uncle Cecil, for example, saw himself as a Christian. Yet when he saw Bernadette Devlin, the firebrand Republican from Derry, talking on television, he called out, “Would you look at that Fenian bitch!” “We saw no issue,” McBride reflects, “about going to church on Sunday and doing violence on Monday.”

Bigotry skews everything we see, distorts what we know into stereotypical beliefs. In Northern Ireland, you couldn’t discern who was who by looks or even language, but as a child, McBride heard that you could tell a person was a Catholic if their eyes were too close together, or if they had big families, or if they had ginger hair. McBride pauses. “We had six children in our family, and three had ginger hair! But at the time,” he says, “I never stopped to think about it.”

In a segregated society, where Protestants and Catholics attended different schools, different churches, different pubs, different sporting events, different parades, and even different cemeteries, McBride’s stereotypes remained unchallenged. “I never knew Catholics because I threw stones at them. Catholics live five minutes away,” he reflects, “but they may as well have been five thousand miles away.”

At church, he joined the Boys Brigade, a church-based Boy Scouts group, and met his future wife Sharon. He became a Christian when

he was nineteen years old, accepted Jesus Christ as his savior. This experience was at the core of his identity.

He pauses his monologue, before entering into the trouble.

In 1993, on October 23rd, his wife went in to work at her father's fish shop, Frizzell's on the Shankill Road. It wasn't her turn to go in that day. Later, a friend called.

"There was a bombing," he says, "and the shop had been blown to bits. Nine people were killed." (Actually, ten people died, including two children. The tenth was the IRA bomber Thomas Begley. Another IRA man, Sean Kelly, survived the explosion. The IRA had intelligence that the local Ulster Defence Association had a regular meeting upstairs at that time, and they intended to take out the leadership.)

People spent a long time in the rubble, looking for body parts, McBride says. "Then someone found Sharon's wedding ring."

He remembers having to tell his two-year-old daughter, "Your mum is going to be with Jesus for a while." Even now, McBride struggles to tell the story. Every sentence comes slowly. It's as if he's reading the story from a script deep inside himself, and he has to look inward, far inside, to make out the words. Maybe he's afraid of coming apart in front of us, guests and strangers, so he takes it slower.

He began to work with Families Against Intimidation and Terror in 1994 and carried on a relentless personal campaign for justice. He was, he tells us, burning with anger. When he saw that Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, was a pallbearer for Begley, McBride went crazy. He began to hound the Sinn Fein leader wherever he went—in Dublin, in Boston, New York, Washington—even leaving messages on his answering machine. McBride is quoted in a 1994 *New Yorker* piece as saying that, though treated "like some kind of pop star," McBride believed Adams is "a murderer, because he supports the killing of innocent men, women, and children. He is up to his neck in blood."

FIVE MINUTES of HEAVEN (2009) is a largely forgotten film, perhaps because it came out over a decade after the peace accords, when the world's attention had long wandered away from Northern Ireland, seeking bigger fires and active violence. That wandering of media attention is lamentable, because the peace is a story that we need to listen to, now more than ever, and the film's dramatic rendering of the difficult path to peace is one of the best I know. It explores what happens to victims and

perpetrators after peace is declared, when the war is supposed to be over but still rages inside those who have to cope with impossible losses.

The film's action begins in 1975, when a teenaged Alistair Little, acting an aspiring Ulster Volunteer Force paramilitary, kills a Catholic man, Jim Griffin, while Griffin's eight-year-old brother Joe watches in frozen horror. Alistair kills Jim for sectarian reasons—some Protestant had been threatened, and Jim would have to pay the price—but Joe ends up feeling as if he were responsible. Based on the actual murder by the real Alistair Little of a Catholic victim, the film tells us that Little was arrested and sentenced to prison, but is released twenty-five years later, under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

Thirty-three years after the murder, Little and Griffin have agreed to meet on camera for a documentarian's reconciliation project—a film within the film, if you will. Little has served his sentence and has gone on to achieve international acclaim for his work with other former paramilitaries. His story of personal reform garners him wide praise as a model of conflict transformation. Joe, meanwhile, has stewed in shame and guilt about his brother's murder, something his mother blamed him for.

On the car ride to the site where filming is to take place, Griffin keeps having flashbacks, startling into the present. The past eats at him, feasts on his every waking moment. He keeps seeing the masked face of the killer, his own silent frozenness, his mother viciously blaming him for doing nothing. It's pretty clear that he's not simply angry. He's suffering from flashbacks, after all, that rock him to the core. If I were a doctor, I'd diagnose him with post-traumatic stress disorder. He's not going to this meeting for a handshake from Little, of course. He wants revenge. He wants Little dead.

HERE AT WAVE, our own more sedate version of Joe Griffin sits with us. McBride's energy coils, from years of holding back without letting go. "I started to write letters to Gerry Adams," he says. "On Sharon's birthday, I enclosed a photo of Sharon."

He keeps fiddling with the Band-Aid on his left thumb; it keeps coming undone, he keeps trying to reattach it. He needs to do something with his hands as he talks.

He was so angry then. All he wanted was some acknowledgment of his loss, his pain. He wrote letter after letter, sending nine different ones—on her birthday, on their wedding anniversary, on the anniversary

of her death. He even translated the last one into Irish, searching for some way of getting a response.

I MET GERRY ADAMS during his St. Patrick's Day visit to the States in 2005, at John Carroll University. His reputation preceded him. Of all the larger-than-life figures of Northern Ireland, I'd heard most about him, despite—or perhaps because of—his entanglement with the organization responsible for more deaths than any other during the Troubles. He was handsome, tall and bearded, and cut a striking figure. For a time, the British government had a policy of having actors read his speeches, rather than allow him to be represented on the BBC, and for good reason. His voice was authoritative, his words uncompromising. He was an Irish revolutionary, Che without the beret, and he survived three bullets during a failed assassination in 1984. By 2005 he was something of a statesman, though his words were as unpinnable as they'd ever been. I wanted, more than anything, to hear Adams engage in reflection, even remorse, for all the killing.

“WHEN I WROTE that letter in Irish” McBride says, “I got a letter from Gerry Adams in response, saying that no one was working harder than Sinn Fein for peace and reconciliation. But just two weeks later, an IRA bombing killed a man and his two-year-old daughter.”

Adams's appearance at our university took place in the Varsity Gym. Over three thousand people packed in to see him interviewed by the local NPR news host, Dan Moulthrop. Ever the politician, Adams maintained his cagey distance, evading direct responsibility for the killings of the IRA. I was a little in awe of him, feeling that pull of charisma that powerful people have. It's more than how they look, or even how they carry themselves. There's something else—what you know about them as well. I knew that Adams was implicated in great violence, and that he saw violence as part of a strategy of liberating Ireland. I admired and feared such zeal, fascinated by the lengths people go to achieve an idea. Such single-mindedness, such focus of vision, invariably made human lives disposable. He stood by his version of things, for better or for worse, as did all his comrades in the Republican movement. They may have private regrets, but in public those in the Sinn Fein party argue they had just cause to act as they did, to try to liberate Ireland from British control.

ONE DAY, during McBride's own single-minded pursuit of retributive justice, he happened to go into the New Lodge—a predominantly Catholic neighborhood in North Belfast and ground zero for the Troubles—to proselytize. What he saw shocked him. He saw the British Army—the army protecting him—abusing Catholics in the streets. That gave McBride a different view of what was happening on the ground. The reality, he knew then, was more complicated than he had seen it. He started to think about the men who had destroyed Frizzell's and killed his wife. He began to wonder what their lives were like. "Sometimes it's quite easy," he says, "to dismiss the people who killed Sharon as psychopaths." He pauses. "But I've never met a psychopath."

After the Good Friday Agreement, at a conference on Post-Traumatic Stress, a loyalist paramilitary invited him out to have a drink. As a rule, McBride avoided all contact with paramilitaries, even those from his own community, because they were involved in killing. He didn't want his pursuit of justice sullied by such contact. But for some reason this time he decided to break his own rule. At the bar, the loyalist saw a former IRA man who was also at the conference. They got to talking, for the first time. Then the former IRA man touched Alan's hand, a gesture that was intentional, and he said, "You know, Alan, what happened that day on the Shankill Road was wrong, and as an Irish Republican, I'm sorry."

It struck McBride with such force, that tender gesture with the hand, he tells us, while fiddling with his loose Band-Aid again. In 2009, over fifteen years after the Shankill bombing, McBride was asked by Channel Four to be involved in a TV documentary about Christ through the eyes of various well-known politicians, including Gerry Adams. The episode featuring Adams was to explore the idea of Jesus as revolutionary.

"I have to say," McBride says, "other than the very obvious facial hair, I doubted that they would have anything in common."

McBride decided to contact Reverend Harold Good, a Protestant minister who had played a key role in the peace process and who had overseen the decommissioning of the IRA with Father Alec Reid. He decided that he was ready to do the documentary, but he wanted to meet Gerry Adams before the planned meeting that would take place on camera. The producers of the documentary didn't want them to meet beforehand. Naturally, they wanted the first meeting, but McBride

made it a condition of his participation on the documentary, so the filmmakers relented.

IN FIVE MINUTES of Heaven, Joe Griffin waits in an upstairs room of the manor house, nervously anticipating his meeting with Alistair, his brother's killer. Griffin is dressed in a suit, but he's carrying a knife beneath his belt, ready for revenge. During his wait, he meets Vika, a blond show-runner from Vladivostok whose job it is to look after Joe. She's kind, and he takes a liking to her, recognizing her shy kindness. They share a smoke on the roof balcony, and he flirts with her a little. In their first conversation, Vika listens to Joe as he tells her why he got involved in the film (the producer "showed me a little kindness"), and what he intends ("five minutes of heaven").

However, in their second conversation, after a failed attempt to film Griffin's descent down the stairs, Griffin hears that Vika has visited Little. He is astonished—half in fury, half in curiosity. He wants to know about Little, his flat, his life. Vika says she likes Little, but that his flat is cold and empty, and sad. Vika adds that Little "was worried for [Griffin]." This concern completely vexes Griffin. This news, almost inarguably, alters Griffin's fantasy about Little, about his worldly profiting from his role as a reformed murderer.

He ends up leaving the manor house in a huff, before the meeting with Little can take place. What makes Griffin really lose it is hearing that Little himself is suffering, that he is, in Vika's words, "a broken man." In an uncanny way, Vika functions as an informal mediator between Joe and Alistair. From elsewhere, with no history or connection to the conflict, Vika can offer Joe a window into Alistair's brokenness. Contrary to Joe's fantasy projection, Alistair was also profoundly changed by his murder of Jim Griffin. Despite his recent fame, Alistair remains wounded.

Of course, Little is there for his own reasons. He admonishes the filmmaker for his intention to capture a microcosm of the peace accords, telling him that "reconciliation is not on the agenda. He has come here and I have come here, so he can confront me." Little wants to face the music of his own guilt. But when Griffin dashes out from the house, followed by a gaggle of people trying to convince him to stay, Little watches mutely and helplessly from inside, knowing that his own redemption will not come so easily.

AT WAVE, McBride leans back, thinking about that meeting with Adams. He recalls how tense he was, in Reverend Good's house, before meeting with the man he blamed for his wife's death. "I was very very nervous when he come into the room," he says. "The first thing [Adams] said to me was that he apologized for the Shankill bomb. And he didn't say, 'You have to understand.'" They talked for two hours about everything, especially about the Troubles, and though they would not come to agreement on every point, McBride came away a different man.

On the walls in the common room at WAVE, we see photos of the stars—Liam Neeson, who played Alistair, and James Nesbitt, who played Joe. Interestingly, as if to show a bit of the moral imagination, the actors played roles representing someone from the other community. Neeson plays the loyalist Little, and Nesbitt plays the Irish Griffin. Nesbitt in particular is a supporter and friend of WAVE.

I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT of *Five Minutes of Heaven* as one of the best films about the Troubles because it shows the deep wounds that persist—for both victims and perpetrators—long after the violence is over. Nesbitt's wrenching performance as a victim with PTSD is breathtaking and heartbreaking. Watching him twitch, burning on the pyre of his own guilt and shame, is exhausting. But Little, the perpetrator, is haunted as well. Little admits to his therapist that "I feel I've come to the end of what I can take. [They say] Time will heal . . . [but] the years just get heavier. Why don't they tell you that? Nobody tells you that." He keeps thinking of Griffin. "He's always there," he says. "In my head. I don't know where to go."

After their failed meeting for the documentary on reconciliation, the two men end up meeting in an abandoned house. It may well be the same two-story home where the murder had taken place, a lifetime before. Little walks into this ruined house, expecting to find Griffin. There he is, behind the door, ready for revenge. Their subsequent struggle leads them to fall out of an upper-floor window onto the street below, right in front of the window where Griffin's brother would have been killed. They both appear to be dead. Then they begin to move slowly, gingerly, half-wrecked by the fall. Little says, "Get rid of me, Joe, so that when you wake up in the morning, it's not me in your head, it's your daughters . . . Live your life with your daughters . . . Don't give them me. Go home and tell them you've killed me off and live your life for them."

Griffin takes a cigarette in shaking hands and lights it, then walks away.

Back at home, Griffin just stares at his family watching television, his face somewhere between awe and pain. Awe at the family sitting peacefully on the couch, pain at his distance from them. His daughter feels him staring and smiles back, before looking back at the TV. The film doesn't explore how those children have been affected by his pain. That's the story for another film.

He does, however, wind up going to a grief support group.

In the circle of fellow griever, Griffin struggles to find the right words to explain why he's among them: "I don't know what to say or how to say it. . . . I want my daughters to have a dad they can be proud of. That's it. That's out."

I love that moment, the simplicity and power of the final beats of dialogue, where Griffin finally says what he's held on to so long, holding it even closer, perhaps, than his own children. His self-hatred is finally exposed to the light of this circle, people who can understand what it's like to feel helpless and ashamed and lost at the death of a loved one.

The scene cuts to Little, walking in downtown Belfast. Griffin calls Little and tells him, without further explanation: "We're finished."

This simple message brings Little to his knees, a smile slowly breaking across his face, and emotion washing over him. He gets up, looks around to figure out where he is going, the camera pans back, and he disappears in the general crowd, making him just another person on their way to somewhere. In that lovely shot, we're to believe that Little too is somehow freed from his past, because Griffin is also freed. That they are both able to rejoin humanity.

I've always loved the film because, at least in part, it's an exemplar of what John Paul Lederach calls the moral imagination. In contrast to nearly every representation of the Troubles, *Five Minutes* helps us see the humanity of a loyalist character, riven by fear and drawn by anger to commit an act of egregious violence. It also helps us see the consequences of that violence, not only to the victim (and the victim's family, themselves victims), but also to the perpetrator, whose life is also never the same afterward. It shows us the importance of mediators and peacebuilders like Vika, Little's therapist, and the grief support group. It demonstrates that peace requires ongoing attempts at reconciliation, even if it may ultimately be impossible for some. And that peace is a long and difficult process of returning home to ourselves.

DURING OUR BREAK AT WAVE, after seeing the photos of Nesbitt and Neeson, I ask McBride about *Five Minutes of Heaven*. Apparently, McBride shares with us, the real-life Joe Griffin wanted the film's ending changed. He didn't think that things should be resolved so easily, because they hadn't been in actual life. The real-life Alistair Little resisted changing it, since he'd been the primary consultant on the script. Somehow the filmmakers struck a compromise to make the ending as we see it. But in the end, Joe was terribly upset by the negotiation and by the way the film ended. To make matters worse, Alistair published a book when the movie came out, giving more of his side of the story and profiting further from his past exploits. Despite the lovely complexity of the film's ending, the whole process may have deepened the wound for the real-life victim Griffin.

When McBride's mother-in-law heard about his meeting with Gerry Adams, and saw Adams at McBride's speaking event at Stormont, she was devastated.

"Why did you meet that man?" she said to her son-in-law, astonished, horrified. It led to their falling out.

"I don't know if my mother-in-law will ever come around to that," McBride says.

At a talk in 2015, McBride would say, "That's part of the cost of building peace. It's so fraught. . . . It's a very lonely road."

Before his meeting with Adams, he used to speak at Unionist gatherings all the time. "I seldom get invited to Unionist events these days," he says. "I get invited more often than not to Nationalist events. There's a price to be paid for that. I do believe that some people have to stand up and change the script a wee bit. Because if they don't, we just go on repeating the same old stuff."

I ask McBride if he ever wants to reconcile with Sean Kelly, one of the bombers who survived. In 2013, at the thirtieth anniversary memorial service for Thomas Begley, the bomber who died, Kelly said that he apologized for a bombing that went "horribly wrong": "I am truly sorry for the loss of life and the injuries that were suffered that day, and for the suffering the families have endured," he said.

"I've been asked if I've wanted to meet Kelly, but I've always refused," McBride says. "I see myself as someone who's quite forgiving, but the whole Sean Kelly thing is a step too far."

Kelly had recently been in the news, as the Northern Ireland Police Service suspected he has had ties to dissident IRA members who are

still in the killing business. Every couple years, Kelly's name reemerges in the papers, as if he's unable to recede entirely into the past. He lost an eye in the bombing, and his left arm is slightly crippled, the victim of his own attack. In any film of the actual life of Sean Kelly, there will be no panning back, no elegant disappearance into the general crowd.

McBride pauses, trying to reattach the Band-Aid again. Here we are, tucked safely in the middle of a leafy grove in the prosperous suburbs, yet only a long stone's throw from areas that not too long ago were the site of bombings and assassinations, the daily dread of masked men and army checkpoints. McBride cannot disappear into the prosperous present, he's thinking about the man who ended his wife's life, but somehow survived.

"I know where he lives," he says. "And I actually know the shop he works at." McBride fiddles again with the Band-Aid, then finally gives up. "But he doesn't stop me from getting involved in peace work."