

Say Nothing: Everything essential about the Northern Ireland conflict left unsaid

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Say Nothing (2024), about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, came to UK terrestrial streaming platform All4 last year after previous runs on Hulu and Disney+, the drama's producers. Based on Patrick Radden Keefe's 2018 book, the six-hour, nine-part series boasts an impressive cast and high production values.

It runs from the 1960s through the 1998 Good Friday Agreement to the 2014 arrest of Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams. Its occasional glimpses of something important cannot overcome a general superficiality.

The Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) waged a military campaign for some 30 years, involving heroic self-sacrifice from its volunteers. But that campaign ended in the nationalist Sinn Féin joining a power-sharing agreement that left the foundations of British imperialism untouched.

These events underscore the necessity of a critical political appraisal that can explain why the bourgeois nationalist programme on which the IRA's campaign was based led to that outcome.

This can only come from an international revolutionary socialist perspective. Without that, responses to the Troubles are driven into one of two dead ends—glorifying and replicating the perspective that led to this dead end, or rejecting the struggle against imperialism altogether.

Say Nothing adopts the latter conclusion, even though it focuses chiefly on those who viewed the signing of the Good Friday Agreement—establishing a power-sharing executive made up of Unionist and Republican parties—as a betrayal of their struggle and the sacrifices they made. The IRA volunteers at its heart are treated sympathetically, but as damaged victims of their own misguided principles. It is a cautionary morality tale, reflecting Keefe's conclusion that the struggle against imperialism will destroy both those who undertake it and those around them.

Keefe is a talented investigative journalist, but his human-interest writing reflects his political outlook as a liberal critic only of some of imperialism's worst excesses. A recent description, that he "hunts for ugly truths," points to this. He is a solidly establishment figure, serving in 2010–11 as a policy adviser in the Office of the Secretary of Defense during the Obama presidency.

Keefe became interested in the Troubles and began his research after reading an obituary of Dolours Price in 2013.

Dolours and her sister Marian were among the first women accepted as active IRA volunteers upon its 1969 resumption of armed struggle against the British military occupation. They were members of the Belfast Brigade's "Unknowns", a secret cell reporting only to the highest local leadership to avoid information leaks to the British state.

The sisters were sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for their part in the 1973 Old Bailey bombing. After the Good Friday Agreement, Dolours (played as an older woman by Maxine Peake) was among those interviewed for a controversial oral history project at Boston College, in which 50 Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries were interviewed between 2001 and 2006.

The testimonies, supposed to remain sealed during their lifetimes, were subpoenaed by the Police Service of Northern Ireland for investigations into open murder cases from the Troubles in 2011, leading to 11 interviews being handed over by 2014. Some of these cases related to the 17 "Disappeared" victims of the IRA, including IRA members suspected of informing to British forces.

The highest profile of these was Jean McConville, a widowed mother of 10. In 1972, she was abducted by a local Belfast IRA unit on suspicion of being a British informer and shot in the back of the head. Her body was not found until 2003.

Her children have always denied that she was an informer. Brendan Hughes, Officer Commanding of the Belfast IRA, told Boston College she admitted it and was initially given a warning, but was killed when she resumed informing. Dolours Price said she drove McConville across the border to be killed.

McConville's killing was used to divert attention from the involvement of British forces in loyalist paramilitary assassinations and attacks. Her case provided the state with opportunities to pursue Adams, long accused of being the head of the Belfast IRA, including by Dolours Price and Hughes in their testimonies.

Adams denies this, and no legal evidence exists against him. Boston College tapes were used in his 2014 arrest, but he was released without charge.

McConville's killing is placed at the centre of *Say Nothing*, which reinforces its political agenda. Keefe's interest in McConville can be compared with his attitude to another of the Disappeared, Captain Robert Nairac, described by him only as a "dashing British Army officer... working undercover."

Nairac was repeatedly accused of collusion with loyalist assassination squads and involvement in the Ulster Volunteer Force's Miami Showband Massacre.

Keefe responded in 2013–14 to news coverage dog whistles. Treating McConville's killing as a crime story that needed resolution, he concluded speculatively that Marian Price was likely her killer.

Marian denies it and launched defamation proceedings against Disney and Minim Productions. McConville's children, appalled that her killing has been turned into entertainment, denounced the series. One Boston College interviewer said Keefe never mentioned his Pentagon past when researching the project.

That project interviewed primarily Republicans opposed to the Good Friday Agreement and embittered at being left with responsibility for an exhausted military campaign while Adams became a statesman in the new political landscape.

Keefe naturally offers only cursory nods to the long history of British oppression of Ireland, or to events in the North outside Belfast. Little or no context is given as to why people were prepared to risk their lives in this struggle.

After the 1922 Treaty partitioned Ireland, leaving the six northern

counties a British colony, the IRA remained committed to the armed struggle for a united, independent Ireland. This was eventually suspended after the failure of the Border Campaign (1956–62), aimed at forcing withdrawal of British troops, and the IRA became somewhat dormant.

However, the Catholic working class in Northern Ireland was subject to appalling conditions and discrimination in work, housing and politics. Civil rights campaigns were bloodily suppressed amid a rising wave of loyalist attacks.

1969 was a turning point in the reanimation of the IRA's activity. In that year, the Labour government sent British troops to Northern Ireland. Ostensibly sent to protect Catholic communities from loyalist attacks, they built up a military state apparatus that targeted nationalist protests.

The 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry, when British paratroopers opened fire on unarmed civil rights protesters, killing 14, galvanised opposition to British rule. It goes barely noticed in *Say Nothing*. We hear only that the IRA bombing campaign has escalated from 150 bombs in 1970 to 1,000 in 1972, its most violent year.

British colonialism's brutalities on the ground are barely explored in general. We see the Burnttollet Bridge violence in 1969, when a loyalist mob brutally attacked a peaceful march while the Royal Ulster Constabulary watched, which played a part in radicalising the Price sisters. But it is treated outside any wider context of imperialist occupation.

There is some acknowledgement that the intelligence operations headed by Brigadier Frank Kitson (Rory Kinnear) repeated the vicious tactics he had used against the Mau Mau in Kenya. But where Keefe is at pains to show how IRA activities affected its own members or civilians, he has next to nothing to say about British military collusion in the killing of Catholic civilians.

The brutality of British rule is reduced to a mirrored intrigue between the IRA and the army, with Kitson's team beating information out of IRA suspects. When the IRA "disappear" two such assets, we see Kitson say that either the military were being fed vital information or they were driving the IRA to murder their own men—"either way we win."

There is a similar approach to the state brutality against the Price sisters. Imprisoned in a men's facility in London, they went on hunger strike for transfer to a women's prison in Northern Ireland and political status. For 167 days of their 208-day strike they were force-fed in a horrific manner.

The medical team administering the force-feeding quit in protest at the cruelty. This is not pursued further. Nor are the protests supporting the sisters.

Keefe's description of the unfolding of a hunger strike as "morbid but undeniable entertainment" says a great deal about his own approach.

There were three IRA hunger strikes during this period, but producers decided "we can't do a series with two hunger strikes." They therefore omitted the 1981 strike in which 10 republicans died. More importantly, given the focus on Hughes, they also omitted the preceding strike, which Hughes called off in confused circumstances after 53 days.

The political content of the campaigns and the response of British imperialism are not Keefe's interest. He has written that "As a test of the limits of human endurance, [a hunger strike] can become a spectacle for rubberneckerers, a bit like the Tour de France."

Keefe treats the IRA volunteers as irreparably damaged, with Adams' political manoeuvring contributing. But he follows the line of the British, Irish and above all American ruling classes, which saw power-sharing involving Sinn Féin as the necessary means of creating a stable environment for corporate investment and building a cheap labour platform in the North.

He portrays Adams as evasive and manipulative, while still praising him for his realpolitik: "Whatever callous motivations Adams might have possessed, and whatever deceptive machinations he might have employed, he steered the IRA out of a bloody and intractable conflict and into a

brittle but enduring peace."

A serious artistic appraisal of the Troubles, and serious attempts to understand their effect at a personal level, would have to begin from a historical and political understanding both of British imperialism and the limitations of bourgeois nationalism.

In a contemporary analysis rooted in Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained the class basis for Adams' and the Sinn Féin leadership's actions in an editorial statement, "British-Irish agreement enshrines sectarian divisions":

Once again, a movement that professed anti-imperialist credentials has exchanged army fatigues for business suits and been incorporated into new mechanisms for preserving the rule of big business. This is the logical outcome of the nationalist perspective.

Placing this in the context of the capitulation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the African National Congress, the Sandinistas and others, the editorial continued:

The bitter lessons of this century demonstrate that the Irish capitalist class and the petty-bourgeois nationalists are incapable of overcoming imperialist domination and social and political inequality. The legacy of colonial and class oppression cannot be resolved through jerry-rigged agreements between the imperialist powers and parties that essentially function as their local representatives...

The objective conditions exist for overcoming the age-old divisions between Catholic and Protestant, Irish and British workers, provided they are united on a programme that articulates their basic needs for decent jobs, health care, housing and democratic rights. These needs can only be realised on a programme for the international unification of the working class against the profit system.

No one expects Keefe to have any sympathy for such a critique. But this does not detract from or excuse *Say Nothing's* superficial artistic approach, which is rooted in Keefe's own political hostility to the struggle against imperialism. This, it must be stressed, is ultimately why his work was chosen as the basis for such a prestige, big-budget drama by the Disney corporation.



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