

CORRYMEELA MEMORIES: 1967-1974

The following pages are abridged from Part 2 of “Understanding Backwards¹: Reflections on a Life”, a compilation of personal memoirs currently covering the years 1947-1980. I have extracted the sections that describe my early encounters with the Corrymeela Community, which has been a major influence in my life since I first encountered it in 1967.

Early in the morning of Saturday July 1st, 1967, I arrived, aged 20, into Belfast Harbour off the Heysham Ferry and took my first steps on Irish soil – or, at least, concrete. I was met by Sam Thompson, who had issued the invitation to visit, with his friends from church, Ken (known as Paddy) Patterson and his wife, Eileen. Many of the details of that day are now lost somewhere in the memory-banks, but the most significant detail is unforgettable – we travelled by car from Belfast to Ballycastle and the Corrymeela Centre to join a summer Work Camp. Thus within a few hours I had begun a relationship with both Northern Ireland and Corrymeela that was destined to be life-changing in so many ways.

Having met Sam in Paris at an A-level preparation course in 1965, we had corresponded over the next two years. In a letter dated 2nd January 1967, Sam wrote about his recent visit to “the town of Ballycastle situated on the Antrim coast and to a large house called Corrymeela”. He explained about its origins and aims – “concerned with improving in some way or other the relationship between different parts of the community in Northern Ireland” – and ventured the thought that “in a few years’ time it will be as well-known as Iona and Agape”. He closed his letter by indicating that there would be more work camps in the coming summer and offering “a hearty invitation to come over and not only see a little bit of the country but to meet many of its people and indeed people from other countries as well”. I decided to go!

By this time Sam was at the end of his second year as a student in Queen’s University Belfast, and though we were the same age I had just finished my first year at Borough Road College ... I had very little awareness of Northern Ireland or its history, even though there had been some references to “the Irish question” in my A-level History course. (Ireland was mentioned in such courses when it became a problem for the English, but rarely otherwise.) I had become vaguely aware of a fundamentalist preacher called Ian Paisley, who had caused a stir by protesting against the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Pope in 1966 (not for the first or the last time!), and even in my more evangelical days had found this disturbing. But it was an innocent – or naïve – young man who made that first Irish journey; it was the start of a very steep learning curve.

Paddy and Eileen Patterson, then in their 30s, were warm and welcoming ... Paddy was a lecturer in Maths at the Belfast Technical College, and Eileen had been a teacher before starting her family. They had been students at Queen’s University in the 1950s and were considerably influenced by the Presbyterian Dean of Residence (Chaplain), Rev. Ray Davey, who had been exploring ideas around community and reconciliation that eventually led to the establishment of Corrymeela, of which they became founder-members. ... We set off after lunch in a car – though I don’t remember who was driving it – and reached Corrymeela in the late afternoon of that warm early Summer day.

¹ The title, “Understanding Backwards”, is based on the observation by Søren Kierkegaard in his journal that:
*“It is perfectly true, as the philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards.
But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.”* [Journals IV A 164 (1843)]

I don't think I had seen anything before like the view from the cliff edge, north across Rathlin Sound towards Rathlin Island, with Fair Head to the east and the Mull of Kintyre only a little further away. I met the Work Camp leaders, Peter Moss – a young Queen's University Law student – and Desney Kempston (now Cromey), a few years older, who was at that time working as the Associate Dean to Ray Davey at the Queen's Presbyterian Centre. Ray had established the very new Corrymeela Community just a couple of years previously, in 1965, when the nine-acre site at Ballycastle – formerly a Holiday Fellowship home – was purchased in an act of extreme faith.

Sam and I were part of a group of about 20 campers, many of them students, some working, with an age range mostly from the mid-teens to the late 20s. One of the youngest was a future lifelong friend, Liz Maxwell (now Parkin), then aged just 16. Another of the younger campers was Robert Wasson (son of Rev Moore Wasson, a BBC Northern Ireland producer for religious programmes). One of Ray Davey's sons, Rob, about the same age as me, was also in the group, and there were several others with whom I was later to meet again in different circumstances ...

Most of the campers were from Protestant backgrounds – Corrymeela at this stage had not really managed significantly to breach the “community divide”, though it aspired to do so. But there were three young North Belfast Catholic men present – probably in their late teens – who had become involved through a programme for young unemployed people. I got on well with them but only saw one of them again (during a work camp the following year) and during the early days of the Troubles I remember wondering if they had been drawn into any of the conflict, as so many of their contemporaries were.

I also have a sense that when we arrived there was a broadcast service being prepared, and George Gibson, whom I was to get to know much better in subsequent years, was there helping to teach the music, along with Trevor Williamson (later a Presbyterian minister) playing the piano. I remember the preparation, but not the service itself.

The Corrymeela Centre was still in a fairly primitive stage of development. There was the wooden house in Dutch Barn style, that had recently been painted white, just known as “the House”, a few wooden chalets on the field close to the House and then, about a hundred and fifty yards away, the Work Camp – more wooden chalets and a “Main Chalet” where people cooked (at a simple stove in the corner), ate and generally gathered. The only running water was a stand-pipe outside the front of the Main Chalet. Toilets were across at the House – or possibly *en route* if circumstances permitted! Derick Wilson (whom I was not to meet until the following year) used to tell people that if they came to Corrymeela they would have to make their own beds – with hammer and nails – and he was not too far from the truth.

That first evening the campers sat outside the Main Chalet on benches, close to a wooden cross on the cliff edge, for a short act of worship. One of the campers read a meditation by the French Catholic writer, Michel Quoist, while we looked out over Rathlin Sound. It was a very special moment, and I wrote about it many years later for the journalist, Alf McCreary, who included it in his 2007 book, “In War and Peace”:

“I was sitting on a bench outside the old Work Camp at Ballycastle and looking beyond the cliff-top Corrymeela cross towards Rathlin Island. Someone was reading ‘The Sea’ from Prayers of Life by Michel Quoist, and from that point everything changed for me. ... I knew nothing of Northern Ireland and its troubled history ... Yet that simple but stunning meditation on a cliff top challenged my narrow confusions, and began to point out new possibilities, and new relationships.”

Other memories from that first Work Camp are hazy, though one remains strong. One of our tasks was to check out the strength of the floors in the sleeping chalets. Peter Moss and I crawled underneath them – they were set up on breeze-blocks – while Robert Wasson jumped on the floors above us! Health and Safety principles were not so well established in those days. I remember Desney, sometime later, saying that she thought I was very shy, though by the end of the week there was no doubt that I had definitely started to come out of my shell.

Sometime during that week the camp was visited by a young Presbyterian minister, Rev Bill Jackson (later a founder member of the Cornerstone Community), and his son. They had cycled over from somewhere in Co. Londonderry and we sat on the cliff edge and talked. I remember very little of our conversation, except that Bill expressed the view that Northern Irish people didn't like the English very much. I wasn't absolutely sure how to take that remark.

During that week I remember picking up a copy of a book of sermons by Martin Luther King, "Strength to Love". I knew something of King as a leader in the movement for civil rights in the USA but was completely overwhelmed by the power of his intellect and the challenging nature of his writings. It made a very deep impression and made another chink of light in my attempt to make sense of several years of "evangelical certainty". On an entirely different cultural level, I was also introduced to the songs of the Clancy Brothers and bought one of their albums when I was back home in England.

Back in Belfast, staying with Paddy and Eileen for a couple of days, I was shown around a little of the city. I remember little of where we went, except that as we drove through Sandy Row, already bedecked with flags and bunting for the imminent Twelfth of July marches, Paddy remarked that it was as well that I was not wearing a green tie. The significance of that remark became clearer over time.

... I was determined to go back to Corrymeela for the planned New Year "Corrymeet" conference, but an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease resulted in the cancellation of that event and I was not able to return to Northern Ireland until the following summer.

In the summer of 1968, I determined to spend longer in Corrymeela and headed there for two work camps, from June 29th to July 17th. Again, I was met by Sam Thompson and the Pattersons, though this time Sam did not come to the work camp; his sister Jean came instead. The first of these camps was largely populated by young people from Belmont Presbyterian Church in East Belfast, along with some leaders. One of these was Alasdair Fraser, son of Donald Fraser, a leading Presbyterian clergyman. At that time Alasdair was studying law, and later became Sir Alasdair Fraser, Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland.

On this visit I also met for the first time Billy McAllister, a retired railway worker from the south of Ireland who had become the Warden of Corrymeela, and David Corkey, the Work Camp Co-ordinator. I recall some quite intense conversations with David, ranging over politics and religion. Sometime during that period a new work camper arrived from Iceland. Gunnþór Ingason was tall and very Nordic in appearance, and we struck up a friendship that has lasted to the present. Another European visitor with whom I was later to develop a long-term friendship was Patrick Schulz from France, then aged about 17 and a pen-pal of Iain Davey, one of Ray's sons. At the end of the first week a television crew arrived from Belfast to record the BBC's *Songs of Praise* from Corrymeela – eventually to be broadcast on Sunday 18th August. George Gibson prepared the work campers to sing as part of the congregation in the Dell, in front of the Main House. Accompaniment was by the Templemore Band with a wind ensemble from the Belfast School of Music. The conductor and musical director for the programme was Havelock Nelson, who at the end of the recording thanked me for being "a tower of strength".

Neither of us at that time could have had any idea that less than a decade later I would be recruited into his Studio Opera Group as a tenor soloist.

During this visit I experienced my first July 12th in Northern Ireland. The work campers headed over to Coleraine to watch the parade, which was not particularly impressive. The thing I remember most is that someone in the crowd stuck a pin in my leg from behind, presumably because I was in their line of vision!

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My determination to get back to Corrymeela other than during the Summer was eventually rewarded just after Christmas 1968, when I attended the Corrymeet conference on the theme of "Communication". I was invited to write a short article on Corrymeet for the Corrymeela Community's *Causeway* magazine (which was edited by Paddy & Eileen Patterson), and this duly appeared in the Spring 1969 edition, though it was uncredited!

By this time events in Northern Ireland were beginning to move towards conflict, and many of those attending Corrymeet had been involved in civil rights marches. Some were leading members of The People's Democracy, an activist organisation, and were planning to take part in a march from Belfast to Derry just a few days later. The marchers were, in fact, attacked at Burntollet Bridge by several hundred loyalists, including off-duty B-Specials (part-time police recruited exclusively from the Protestant community) and this was to become one of the first serious clashes that pointed towards the more obvious start of the Troubles in the Summer of 1969.

My involvement with Corrymeela was becoming firmer. In January 1969 I became a Friend of Corrymeela and in February I was invited to be a work camp leader during the forthcoming Summer Programme. As this was to be my final summer as a student, I resolved to stay longer in Northern Ireland, and so it was that I planned to attend two work camps and to stay on for longer to work with family weeks. In fact, I ended up co-leading two work camps (the first with Joy Lindsay and the next with Dorothy Steele, who was later to marry Derick Wilson) and then being a part of two more during which time I was significantly involved in working with the family week children. One of the leaders of the fourth camp that I was involved in that summer was Bert Tosh, then training for the Presbyterian ministry and later a producer for religious broadcasts at BBC Northern Ireland. It was a very formative summer – I met a lot of people whom I was to get to know much better over the coming years, including Derick Wilson, Alan and Paddy Kerr and family, Ian McDowell and family, Diana Carson, Jimmy Hudson, Barry Keating, Danny Todd, John McCollum, John Lamont and many others. I also enquired about the possibility of becoming a full member of Corrymeela and discussed it with one or two people. Paddy and Eileen did wonder, however, if there would be much point in membership for someone living outside Northern Ireland.

It was while I was at Corrymeela for these four weeks that the Americans landed on the moon on July 20th. Someone set up an old television set in the Main House lounge, but reception was terrible and so we "viewed" most of it, including Neil Armstrong's "one small step" remark, in sound only! There was something surreal about this, "observing" something so remote from a place itself rather remote.

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After the four work camps I moved down to Belfast and stayed there with the Pattersons for another two to three weeks, occasionally going back to visit Corrymeela for short periods. During these weeks the pent-up tensions of previous months gave way to overt aggression and all hell began to break out in some parts of Northern Ireland. There was rioting first in Derry following the Apprentice Boys' March on 14th August (which became known as *the Battle of the Bogside*) and then in Belfast,

particularly in the streets that ran between the Catholic/Nationalist Falls and Springfield Roads and the Protestant/Loyalist Shankill Road. Several people were killed and hundreds were injured; many houses were burned; about 1800 people were displaced from their homes, most of them Catholics. Before I left to go back to England, the army had been called out to support the Royal Ulster Constabulary who were under severe pressure in trying to restrain the street mobs. On the very day that the troops began to arrive I was being driven from Belfast up to Corrymeela in Ray Davey's car, and we were passed by many units of soldiers heading in the opposite direction from the airport towards Belfast in army trucks and armoured cars.

A few days before this, I had enquired about going to hear the firebrand preacher, Ian Paisley, who at that time held his Sunday services in the Ulster Hall on Bedford Street, very close to Belfast city centre. Many people in Corrymeela clearly believed Paisley to be responsible for "stirring up old animosities" over the past few years, and his anti-Roman Catholic rhetoric clearly had political as well as religious intent. Paddy and Eileen would not go with me to the service, but took me down, and I sat in the gallery. Disappointingly, the preacher was not to be Ian Paisley, though he led the service and made up for his absence from the pulpit by taking the announcements, which lasted some 25 minutes. In them he warned the nationalists and civil rights protesters that he and his followers would be present in Armagh (?) the following weekend to make sure that their march was thwarted. (In fact, the event did not happen as the army had arrived by the time it was scheduled to take place.) But the bonus, in a somewhat adverse sense, was that the preacher was Bob Jones Jnr, then President and Chancellor (and son of the founder) of Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina (notorious for its extreme fundamentalism and for refusing to take black students until the 1970s). Paisley had received one of his "doctorates" from there, and the university's full-frontal fundamentalist and separatist approach was very much in line with Paisley's own views. Jones's lengthy sermon was an appalling diatribe against "modernism", ecumenism, Roman Catholicism, civil rights (in America and Northern Ireland), communism and everything else that was anathema to his ultra-conservative position. The congregation loved it and roared and laughed in approval. I particularly remember his description of Martin Luther King, who had been assassinated only some 16 months previously, as "that apostate, commie, red, son of Satan"!

A day or so before I left Belfast ..., I discussed with Paddy and Eileen if they thought it would be okay for me to go into West Belfast to look at the areas where the rioting had taken place and where the army had by then set up some provisional barriers between the combatants. They were not happy about it, but they agreed to take me down to the bottom of Divis Street, leading up to the Falls Road, and let me out to walk, with my camera at the ready. I'm not sure exactly where I went (probably up as far as Clonard), though I certainly reached the areas that were under pressure and found myself in streets of terraced houses, some of them abandoned, with small patrols of soldiers and very hastily built barricades of barbed wire. No-one tried to stop me taking photographs of the streets and even of the soldiers; one of the pictures I took clearly shows a group of senior officers standing discussing the situation around them, surrounded by curious children. You could do that then, but it wasn't long before that would become a very risky activity indeed!

I remember asking Paddy Patterson about how he saw the situation and what he thought would happen. "It's terrible," he said, "but it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better." How right he was.

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Over the next year I took every opportunity to go back to Northern Ireland, during almost every holiday period from my teaching job. I wanted to deepen my involvement with Corrymeela ...

While I struggled with the realities of my first year of teaching and tried to readjust to bedsit life in South London, I watched with interest and some concern as events in Northern Ireland increasingly hit the news. It was always bad news, of course, and it was rather bizarre to be the one who wanted to talk about how great a place it was and about the inspiring work of Corrymeela.

When the army had arrived on the streets of Derry and Belfast they were welcomed in the Catholic areas in the belief that the soldiers would keep them safe from attacks by loyalists or the B-Specials. There was criticism of the IRA (who, it was believed, had recently sold their weapons to the Welsh Nationalists) for not defending the nationalist people and the slogan "IRA – I ran away" apparently appeared on some walls in West Belfast. Before the end of the year the split within the IRA deepened and led to the establishment of the Provisional wing, or 'Provos' (named after the declaration of the Provisional Government of Ireland in 1916). Over the next year the once-welcomed British troops became the target of the Provos as representatives of an "occupying force". As the situation deteriorated loyalist "defence" groups formed and eventually morphed into the loyalist paramilitary organisations. The first member of the RUC to be killed, Constable Arbuckle, lost his life on the lower Shankill Road, ironically shot by loyalists protesting about threats to curtail the role of the RUC!

Yet I continued to travel back whenever I could. My circle of friends in London was diminishing ... at the same time my friendship circle in Northern Ireland was growing. ... [*While at Corrymeela in the Summer of 1970*] I spoke to Noel Rae, the Corrymeela Community Secretary, about Community membership and he promised to get back to me. ... Some months later, in January 1971, I received a letter from Noel Rae advising me that I was indeed now a Provisional Member of Corrymeela and that my name would soon be proposed for full membership. This was confirmed in March and shortly after this I applied to take part in another Work Camp, due to start in mid-August 1971. A few days before the Camp was due to start, I received a letter advising me that one of the camp leaders had withdrawn and asking me to lead in his place; my co-leader was to be Jean Thompson, Sam's sister. It was due to start on Saturday 14th August, but just a few days before, on August 9th, Internment without Trial had been introduced by the Stormont government and many Catholic men had been taken into custody on suspicion of being members of, or sympathetic to, the IRA. This created chaos especially in Derry and in West and North Belfast and many families fled their homes, some into the Republic and others to wherever they could find respite. Many headed up to Ballycastle and accommodation was found in the Corrymeela Centre and in local schools. So by the time the work camp was due to start Corrymeela was heavily involved in looking after about 250 children who were, in effect, refugees from Belfast.

Into this chaos I arrived in Belfast on August 10th, along with my mother who was making her first visit to Northern Ireland on the invitation of the Pattersons! Paddy had been involved with other Corrymeela members in driving into the troubled areas – which were now full of "no go" barricades set up by residents trying to prevent the army and police from gaining access – in order to pick up families who were trying to leave. The situation was very volatile and marked a significant lurch towards greater violence. Public opinion in Britain was very critical of the decision to introduce internment, the Republic of Ireland was outraged and many ordinary Catholics were quickly alienated. Many believed that internment was most effective as a means of recruiting new members into the IRA. At that stage no Protestants were interned, which only served to highlight the sectarian nature of the situation.

One evening, before leaving for the work camp, Paddy drove me up the steep Rocky Road that leads up to the Castlereagh Hills, and we looked down over Belfast, many areas of which were in flames. The sky was lit up as people's houses burned; it was, to re-apply the words of WB Yeats, "a terrible beauty"!

At Ballycastle the work campers, together with many ex-campers and other last-minute recruits, were given the option of working in the town with the families billeted in the schools or staying in the Corrymeela Centre. Camp beds and other equipment was found and basic needs were catered for. After a few days some of the families started to head back home, but others stayed, full of anxiety and uncertainty about what would happen next. Some of their husbands and sons were now in internment camps (and eventually transferred to the Long Kesh camp, which was later transformed into the Maze Prison). The internees were soon celebrated on gable walls and in song as “the men behind the wire”! A new and ugly phase of the Troubles had begun.

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If 1971 had seen a serious escalation in the violence, with 152 deaths and many more injuries and homes abandoned, 1972 was to prove to be the worst year of all in terms of the number of deaths. It started very badly in Derry on 30th January with what became known as Bloody Sunday; fourteen unarmed civilians taking part in an anti-internment protest were shot and killed by soldiers of the Parachute Regiment. That same evening, as the news came through, I spoke on the phone with Jenny, a Protestant from South Armagh whom I had met at Corrymeela work camps and who was currently a student at Girton College in Cambridge. Her words have stayed with me: “What the bloody hell were the Paras doing there?!”

In a year of many atrocities, one other that stands out was Bloody Friday, 21st July, when the Provisional IRA planted about 20 bombs over a period of about 40 minutes around Belfast City Centre, killing 9 people and injuring about 130. Two members of the London Corrymeela Group who were visiting Belfast at the time were very shaken by it. I was still in London at the time, where the school term was just coming to an end, though I was due to travel over a few days later. Bloody Friday, like Bloody Sunday, was one of the events that marked a significant moment in collective memory, motivating some to meet violence with violence while inspiring others to work determinedly for peace. There were to be many more such moments in the years to come.

In the period since Summer 1971 I had agreed to take on several projects for Corrymeela relating to music and to the Community’s regular worship. By the summer of 1972 I had prepared a new song book and a worship guide and these had come into use at the Ballycastle Centre. I was also involved in putting together a properly printed hymn book for worship to replace some of the increasingly tatty single sheets that were regularly used. For me this was an interesting exercise in finding good words and music appropriate to the ecumenical realities of Corrymeela, and it both shaped and was shaped by my increasing interest in creative music-making and liturgy. By the 1972 Easter holidays I had an almost complete draft and took it with me on my visit to Belfast so that I could discuss it with Ray Davey and others. One day I was carrying the entire script in a carrier bag from Corrymeela House to take it down to a printer for advice on how to move the project forward. As I walked through Shaftesbury Square towards Great Victoria Street, close to the end of the Donegal Road, an army armoured vehicle pulled up alongside me and I was asked to stop so that they could search me. After a few minutes one of the soldiers called someone on his radio and a senior officer appeared. I was put into the back of the armoured vehicle with the senior officer, which was then backed up to a wall so that I had no means of escape. I was asked questions – where I was going; what I was doing; and so forth – and the officer studied the contents of my bag in great detail. The concept of carrying around the words for a hymn book seemed completely lost on him and it was some time before he clearly decided that I was harmless (but probably a little odd) and I was allowed to leave along with my multiple pages of hymn-words. Later that day someone pointed out a newspaper in which there was a photo of a well-known member of the IRA, looking not unlike me, though if that was the soldiers’

motive in stopping me then the hymn book must have been perceived as a very unusual cover, or perhaps just bizarre.

That Summer I served my first full period as Work Camp Co-ordinator and became yet more deeply involved in Corrymeela's Summer Programme. A letter from the Workcamp Committee Chair, David Ford (much later to become the Alliance Party Leader) in January had asked me to consider taking on the Co-ordinator role during the month of August. I accepted and found myself working with various camp leaders including Danny Todd and Jimmy Hudson (both originally from St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Rosetta, Belfast, where the Pattersons were members) and with increasingly international groups of work campers. It was also a pleasure to work alongside Ruth Patterson, who at that time was Assistant Dean at the Presbyterian Centre in Belfast and hoping to be among the first Presbyterian women to be accepted for ordination into the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. (She was, in fact, the very first, ordained eventually in 1976.)

... During the Autumn of 1972 I made the decision to try to get a job in Northern Ireland. In November I received a letter from Noel Rae, then Chair of the Corrymeela Council, noting my plans to move and indicating that I would be really welcome. He added: "'tis an unusual phenomenon"!

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On New Year's Day 1973 the UK and the Republic of Ireland formally entered the European Economic Community. On that very same day I started work in my new job at Hopefield Secondary School at the edge of the Rathcoole Estate just beyond North Belfast, having discovered, to my surprise, that New Year's Day was not a public holiday in Northern Ireland at that time. The next few months were to prove to be very busy indeed!

... Rathcoole had been built in the 1960s as an area of mixed housing, but the last remaining Catholics had been intimidated out not long before I took up my post at Hopefield; their homes were almost certainly taken by Protestants who had themselves been intimidated out of other parts of North or West Belfast. There was a Catholic Secondary School, Stella Maris, just outside the estate, with declining numbers. ...

In the Spring of 1973 – my first term – the school was preparing to put on a stage performance of *The Sound of Music*. There were some very talented pupils in the cast ... I was recruited to play guitar in the orchestra, made up from a few pupils and staff with guest players. It was ambitious but very successful. During one of the rehearsals the choreographer demonstrated to the stage nuns how to bless themselves by making the sign of the cross, and the pupils duly practised. There were apparently rumblings and complaints and warnings that this would not be acceptable; so the Hopefield 'nuns' were told to omit the sign of the cross! It was clearly just about acceptable to have pupils on stage dressed as nuns but certainly not to behave as nuns. Prejudice has some strange and contradictory expressions!

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In one of my 3rd Year RE classes the discussion somehow got around to considering what people meant when they claimed to be Christian. I asked for a show of hands on how many of the pupils regarded themselves as Christians – about three put up their hands. Then I asked how many regarded themselves as Protestants – every hand went up!

My Corrymeela experience had inspired me to see what could be done to develop relationships between schools from different religious backgrounds. I enquired about the possibility of organising a joint residential at Corrymeela between pupils from Hopefield and the nearby Stella Maris and was

cautiously encouraged to go ahead. So in May 1973 I led the first of these encounters over three days with a group of 4th Year pupils from both schools, along with a colleague from Stella Maris and with the support of Albert Matchett, an RUC community relations officer who had done a great deal of work with and at Corrymeela. It seemed to be effective and the pupils related well to each other, but it was, of course, only scratching the surface. It wasn't clear if there were any significant options for developing those relationships further at that stage.

Some of the teachers at Hopefield were warm and friendly, though others seemed more remote or even unpredictable. I was still involved in a significant learning curve about life in Northern Ireland, even though I had been a regular visitor for over five years. Looking back, I can see how this almost certainly impacted on my relationships with colleagues, many of whom probably wondered about a young Englishman who lacked the kind of awareness of Northern Ireland that could only really come from having been brought up there. ... When I started to get involved in the joint activities with Stella Maris School, some of the other teachers clearly thought I was naïve, foolish and possibly even dangerous. I got a sense from some senior teachers that while they would not object to my joint activities, if something went wrong they would not take responsibility and it would be my problem. One day two middle-aged woodwork/metalwork teachers called me into their room and told me in no uncertain terms that I should not mess with such things, that I was English and clearly didn't understand the situation and that "this used to be a great little country until the IRA started to make trouble ..."! I was also warned by other colleagues that the caretaker and some of the ancillary staff had "connections", which I interpreted as meaning with loyalist paramilitaries.

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Coming to live in Northern Ireland meant, above all, that I could become much more fully involved in the life and work of Corrymeela. It did not take very long for this to happen. The Corrymeela Hymn Book that I had started work on in 1969 was eventually printed and launched at Easter 1973, limited copyright permissions having been gained for use within Corrymeela only. It was words-only, but with suggested tunes (which I eventually compiled into a couple of scrapbooks) and was used for several years at the Ballycastle Centre. In March I became involved in helping to organise a Belfast Corrymeela Group for Members and Friends living in and around Belfast, a precursor of the Corrymeela Cell Groups. I became a regular visitor to Corrymeela House, at No 8 Upper Crescent in the University area of Belfast, where Mathilde Schär, from Switzerland, was now working as Secretary and assistant to Ray Davey. At the end of April I received an invitation to join the Corrymeela Council as a co-opted member to fill a vacancy. This was probably due to my role as administrator of the Summer Programme and developments relating to the links between Corrymeela and Coventry Cathedral.

I had been asked to be one of the Corrymeela contacts with the staff at Coventry Cathedral and to be a leader at the forthcoming Coventry-Corrymeela international work camps scheduled for the summer. During the Easter holidays I drove my motorbike from Stockport, where I was visiting my mother, to Coventry in order to meet and discuss details with the Rev. Ken Woolhouse, the Warden of Kennedy House Youth Centre. Plans had been made for two three-week workcamps in July and August, and I was to be co-leader with Liz Maxwell of the first of these. Coventry Cathedral had also arranged for significant fundraising for Corrymeela, including a BBC television appeal. The well-chosen presenter of the appeal was to be David Kossoff, well-known as an actor and storyteller, and, perhaps most significantly, Jewish. Sometime during the Spring, on a visit to London, it had been arranged that I would call at the BBC in Shepherd's Bush and meet the producer and David Kossoff. It was a little surreal, but he was very warm and enthusiastic about the request. A few weeks later, just after my inter-school residential with Hopefield and Stella Maris pupils at Corrymeela, the production team arrived at Ballycastle along with David Kossoff to film the appeal. As their liaison person, I stayed with

the process, and took some photos. One of them shows David Kossoff in the Dell at Corrymeela, telling a story to a group of primary school children, a picture that was used in later Corrymeela publicity. The appeal was shown throughout the UK on BBC1 television on Sunday 17th June, and was noted by Radio Times:

“**David Kossoff** appeals on behalf of the *Coventry Corrymeela Venture*. In a peaceful, coastal setting, away from the turmoil of Belfast, Corrymeela offers new hope for reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants. Coventry Cathedral is lending this community scheme its special support. Donations, preferably by crossed PO or cheque, to: David Kossoff, Corrymeela House, 8 Upper Crescent, Belfast 7.”

Mr Kossoff did not, of course, stay at 8 Upper Crescent awaiting the incoming mail, so this was passed on to me to read and process. There was a good response from around the UK and from people of many different backgrounds, with the eventual total of over £3,700, which was one of the highest sums raised by a BBC appeal during that period. Apart from the funds raised there were many heart-warming letters of support from contributors for what Corrymeela was trying to do. (Many of them quoted the line from a poem by Moira O'Neill: “*Och Corrymeela an' the! blue sky over it*”.) It was disturbing, however, to find, among the many positive and supportive communications, a few letters directed personally at David Kossoff that could only be described as antisemitic hate mail – at least one of them written in stereotypically spidery handwriting, warning what would happen to all Jews! I was glad that it was me reading them rather than him, but it was a reminder of some of the ugliness of human behaviour, well beyond just that evident on the streets of Northern Ireland at that time.

Along with the Kossoff Coventry Cathedral appeal, this was quite a significant time for television programmes about Corrymeela. BBC Northern Ireland filmed a documentary in May, in part while the Hopefield and Stella Maris group were present, with Sean Rafferty as interviewer and Moore Wasson as Producer. It was aired, though only in Northern Ireland, as “The House Above the Water” on 17th July, just two days after Ulster Television aired “Corrymeela – Another Face of Ireland” throughout the UK. Writing about both programmes in the Belfast Telegraph a few days later, Alf McCreary observed that the Corrymeela story was also the story of Ray Davey, “a remarkable and self-effacing man who is years ahead of his time”!

At the end of June, Liz Maxwell and I met the international work campers in Coventry, and we were commissioned for the first camp by the Provost, Howard Williams, at the altar of reconciliation in the ruins of the old cathedral (which had been bombed by the Luftwaffe in 1940). The cover picture on the Coventry Cathedral Network magazine for September 1973 shows a group of us at the commissioning service, including a long-haired 70s Norman! We all travelled together overnight via the Liverpool boat and arrived at Corrymeela the next day. The work involved digging trenches for pipes and things ahead of the commencement of the building of Coventry House, which was to be the accommodation base for Corrymeela's long-term volunteers. Reflecting back, I have a sense that the digging was not actually very useful and that the work was superseded by what the professional builders did later, but at the time it made for a good work camp!

During the course of the Coventry workcamps, Corrymeela was scheduled to broadcast a live Sunday morning service on 15th July for BBC Radio 4 (by coincidence on the same day as the UTV documentary) and Ray Davey had asked me to help him plan it. I gathered a small group of instrumentalists and singers to perform the music, including Roger Courtney on guitar. It seemed to work rather well and planted the thought of possibly doing something similar again in the future – an embryonic moment for what became *The Corrymeela Singers*.

It was altogether a very busy Corrymeela summer! The Community had appointed its first Ballycastle Centre Director just before the Summer and Harold Good, a Methodist minister in his mid-30s, took up the post at the beginning of July, following a commissioning service at the church in Greenisland where he had been serving for about two years. We instantly established a good relationship and have remained friends since then. Harold had been the minister in Agnes Street Methodist Church, just off the Shankill Road, at the time of the riots in 1969, and had also spent some time in the United States. He came with fresh ideas and was new to the Corrymeela Community, though this did create some tensions when Harold attempted to establish a little more discipline around how the Ballycastle Centre was organised, not least in relation to security, making sure that the Centre was properly locked up overnight, greeting the public, etc.. Because of a significant student orientation and emphasis on informality, some of these issues had been obscured or ignored. Harold was quite correct in trying to deal with this, but it did lead to some difficulties with existing staff, volunteers and some members of the Community. Nevertheless, Harold's six years in the role saw a significant transformation in Corrymeela and the improvement of the physical appearance of the Ballycastle Centre. One of his visions was for a more permanent building for worship and community events. Summer worship in those days was usually in a specially erected marquee, which had an exciting sense of impermanence about it, but was also subject to the (sometimes very severe) elements! It was this process, much discussed with various designs considered, that ultimately led to the building and opening of *The Croí* (Irish for "heart") in 1979.

It was around this time that I learned that Ian Paisley, who since 1970 was the Member of Parliament for North Antrim (which included Ballycastle and Corrymeela), had been invited to visit Corrymeela but had turned it down. A press article shortly after this cited Paisley as describing Corrymeela dismissively as "a sounding board for those who do not support the Crown in its fight against terrorism". There was certainly a strong sense, lasting for a great many years, that Paisley and his religious and political cohort were content simply to mock, sneer and scoff at any groups or individuals who described themselves as "ecumenical" and did not share the extreme position of the Free Presbyterian Church and the DUP.

On the last Sunday in August the Troubles came unexpectedly to the usually quiet, peaceful and moderately 'mixed' town of Ballycastle. A 600 lb bomb packed into beer kegs in a car was parked close to the Catholic Church and was timed to go off at the end of the 11.00 am mass when about 800 people would have been leaving the church. Fortunately, the mass ended five minutes later than usual, so while there were three serious injuries, most of those affected received only minor cuts and bruises. Many windows were shattered, cars were damaged and there was serious damage to two nearby schools. The bomb also blew out the windscreen of the Corrymeela minibus that was parked nearby, having taken some Corrymeela folk to the mass. The outcome could have been so much worse!

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During another joint Hopefield and Stella Maris meeting, spent camping overnight in the Mourne Mountains, the more-or-less-friendly banter between the kids from the two schools indicated that many of the Stella Maris pupils had previously lived in the Rathcoole Estate, but that it had become necessary for them to move out (to put it euphemistically)! It became apparent that some of the Hopefield pupils in the group were very familiar indeed with the details of what had happened! No doubt this is why some colleagues thought that I was naïve! ...

On another occasion I invited my friend, Peter Moss (by then a practising barrister in Belfast), to come and talk to the group about his work. Somehow the totally erroneous impression got about that I was

bringing a priest in to talk to pupils. The visit went well enough, but that rumour appeared to spread and it became clear that some pupils came to believe that I, too, was probably a Catholic. After all, I had an unusual accent, I did strange things such as arranging joint activities with Stella Maris School, I was involved in Corrymeela and similarly “suspicious” activities. Such was the paranoia of the time, especially in a place like Rathcoole and its surrounding estates. (Indeed, in some extreme Protestant and loyalist minds, being an ecumenical Protestant was probably even worse than being a Catholic!)

This crystallised in my mind sometime later when I received a letter from the mother of one of the pupils in my form class (by this time a 2nd Year class). She wrote very sympathetically along the lines of “you shouldn’t have to apologise for what you are”. At first I didn’t understand, and then I realised that she, too, had presumed that I was a Catholic, but that she was trying to reassure me that it didn’t matter and that I shouldn’t be upset by people who were being sectarian and antagonistic!

Nevertheless, some good things were emerging from the inter-school work between Hopefield and Stella Maris and in early February 1974 a mixed group of older pupils took a mixed group of senior citizens from the Newtownabbey area up to Corrymeela where they looked after and entertained them for four days. In some ways the time together at Corrymeela for the young and the old members of the group only reinforced the separate lives to which they had to return, but it did open up constructive thoughts about how such activities could be continued on a longer-term basis.

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One of the bonuses of coming to live in Northern Ireland was that the school summer holidays were longer than in England – a full two months rather than just six weeks! I spent part of this second full summer [1974] not at Corrymeela, but as the local co-leader of an Ecumenical Youth Service (EYS) Work Camp (under the auspices of the World Council of Churches), based in the upper-Shankill estate of Glencairn, just off the Ballygomartin Road. My female co-leader was German and other members of the small team came from several different countries. Our task was to work mainly with the children and young people in the estate, based in St Andrew’s joint Methodist/Church of Ireland church building. Ministry in the church alternated between the Methodists and the Anglicans and the C of I rector at that time was Walter Lewis. Many families had moved out to Glencairn from the Shankill Road and other loyalist areas, as part of the significant demographic movement caused by the Troubles, making it somewhat volatile and prone to many social problems. Paramilitary organisations were significant and powerful in the area. It had been agreed that no Catholics would take part in the Work Camp on the grounds of personal safety. Despite this one of the local paramilitary-linked youth leaders questioned us at one stage as to whether there were any Eastern Orthodox members of the group (which there were not). It was a little surprising that he even knew about the Orthodox tradition (which at that time was almost totally absent from Northern Ireland) but it also suggested that in some ‘Protestant’ thinking the Orthodox were clearly just as bad as Catholics! We were based in the area for two weeks and during that time we organised a range of activities and outings for the young people and also significantly took part in the church’s worship, developing our own creative liturgies.

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During the rest of July and part of August I worked in Corrymeela with the Summer Programme, as part of which another joint group from Hopefield and Stella Maris schools came to stay at the Ballycastle Centre, based in the Tara unit. My only photographic memoir of this residential shows us walking up the side of Knocklayd, the very prominent hill inland to the west of Corrymeela. Then at the end of the August I travelled to Germany to represent Corrymeela at the first ever conference for European Cross of Nails Centres associated with Coventry Cathedral. It was based in a German

Evangelische Akademie, 'Haus Ortlohn', near Iserlohn, in the Sauerland district of Rhine-Westphalia, not far from Dortmund. The theme of the conference was the development of the Coventry Cross of Nails community discipline, based on the concept of "living simply that others might simply live". On the final evening I was invited to give a talk about Northern Ireland and the work of Corrymeela. Many of the other delegates expressed special interest in, and warm appreciation of, Corrymeela's reconciliation ministry.

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On Sunday 10th November ... there was another broadcast service scheduled from the Corrymeela Centre at Ballycastle, a live Sunday morning radio service for RTE (the main broadcasting company in the Republic). The service, on the theme of Hope, was led by Harold Good, with readings from Peter Moss and Chris Murphy, a trainee Jesuit working as a year-long volunteer at the Corrymeela Centre, and musicians were recruited to lead hymns and sing some songs, which I arranged specially for the group either in unison or in two parts. We sang Pete Seeger's "The Flowers of Peace" (to the melody of "Will ye go, lassie, go") and Tom Paxton's "Peace Will Come", and I wrote a new setting of St Patrick's Breastplate, "Christ be with me". The musical line-up involved George Gibson on organ, Roger Courtney as one of two guitarists, plus flute, clarinet and mandolin. Singers included Susan Hudson and Anne McPartland (as soloists), Mathilde Schär (later to marry David Stevens) and Ruth Stevens (David's sister). The group also included two sixth form students from Hopefield, one of whom stayed with the group for several years and later married someone she met at Corrymeela.

The format of gathering together a group of singers and instrumentalists associated with Corrymeela to prepare and perform the music, previously tried out for a broadcast during the Summer of 1973, was once again successful and it was almost immediately agreed that we should make ourselves into a more regular group as a way of presenting Corrymeela through words and music. Thus was born the concept (though not quite yet the name) of *The Corrymeela Singers and Players*², opening up for me and others a highly creative period full of wonderful opportunities and unexpected encounters, but equally of frustrations and disappointments and a great deal of sometimes quite painful self-learning. Looking back, and despite everything, I count myself very fortunate to have stumbled into it and wouldn't have missed it for the world!

Our next appearance came just a week before Christmas, on 18th December, when the regular Belfast Corrymeela Focus meeting became "Focus on Christmas", devised and presented by the group with songs, some very varied readings and congregational hymns – a format that I have used many times since then. Once again there were new arrangements and we ventured for the first time into 4-part singing. The event was deemed a great success.

Norman Richardson

January 2021

² We didn't actually adopt the name, *The Corrymeela Singers and Players*, until early in 1975 when requests began to come in for us to take part in church services and other events.