

Weekend Review



Cancer scandals

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Judging Bertie

'If we all partied, Bertie Ahern served the drinks'. The former taoiseach, 10 years on. Page 4

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I was the boyfriend of Ann Lovett

Ann Lovett died in 1984 after giving birth at a grotto in Granard, Co Longford – a personal and national tragedy that still resonates. Today, Ann's former boyfriend Ricky McDonnell speaks publicly for the first time



Rosita Boland

Richard "Ricky" McDonnell is standing at the gate, staring at a house on Colmcille Terrace, Granard, Co Longford. There was a time, 34 years ago, when he knew this house inside out. It was here he had lived from the age of six to 17 – including several years on his own – until he had to leave. It was here he had spent many hours with his former girlfriend Ann Lovett, who died aged 15 after giving birth at the grotto in the town on January 31st, 1984. It was here, on that January day, Ricky McDonnell's life changed utterly.

Ann Lovett's death became one of the most soul-searching events of 1980s Ireland. It continues to resonate in the national psyche more than three decades later, in part because so many questions were left unanswered.

Ricky McDonnell has never talked publicly about those traumatic days in Granard. Why has he now chosen to break his silence?

"At the beginning I was silent out of fear, and then it was out of respect," McDonnell, now 51, says, when asked why he took so long to speak out. When *The Irish Times* published an in-depth article on the death of Ann Lovett last month, he was encouraged by friends to contact this reporter. "I'm now hoping that other people will come forward and tell what they know about that time," he says.

On the day Ann Lovett died, Ricky McDonnell had been fixing fences with a local farmer in the freezing cold rain before they abandoned the work just after midday. McDonnell went home to Colmcille Terrace, where he was living alone,

and got into bed to keep warm, Radio Luxembourg playing in the background as usual. It was still bright, gone about 4.45pm, when he heard urgent, insistent banging on the door downstairs.

"A friend that I had in the town, who had often borrowed a bike off me before, he was knocking on the door. I got up and answered the door, and he was just standing there, talking gibberish. I could get 'Ann', 'the Palms', 'accident'." ("The Palms" is the name local people call the town's grotto, beside St Mary's Church, with its tall fir-tree palms.)

"It sounded gibberish to me, what he was going on about. He looked in a bit of a daze. And he kept repeating what he was saying, 'That Ann has been up in the Palms, there's been an accident, come on.' I thought he was messing with me. I didn't grasp what he was on about. I kind of ran him from the door. I told him to f*ck off."

"I left my house, and I went to [a friend who lived on the terrace]. His wife was there, and I asked her had she heard if there was anything wrong. I said my friend was after coming to the house, and he was on about something crazy: Ann in the Palms, and that there was an accident. I said, have you heard anything? She said no. And then her husband arrived on the scene. He told me I had to go down to my aunt's; that something was after happening."

Confused, and with rising dread, McDonnell began the short walk to Main Street. Once he reached Market Street (known locally as New Road), he began to hear disturbing sounds. "I could hear screams and crying as I was walking down New Road. It just got louder and louder as I approached the Market corner."

Unbeknownst to McDonnell, scarcely an hour earlier, Ann Lovett had been found in the town's grotto grounds, where she had given birth, her stillborn child beside her wrapped in her coat. By the time he reached Market corner, the ambulance taking Ann, her mother Patricia and her dead baby to Mullingar Hospital had just departed from outside her home on Main Street, where the Lovett family lived above the Copper Pot bar.

On Main Street, "everybody was screaming. It was just horrific. Everybody

was screaming and crying; everybody who was on the main street, and that's probably half the town. All the schoolchildren were coming up from the convent. I saw one girl pulling handfuls of hair out of her own head, screaming."

Bewildered, McDonnell still had no idea what was going on. "But I knew that something bad had happened. Because this, you just wouldn't see it anywhere. Nobody could think up this, and act it out in a movie scene; all them young kids screaming and crying and wailing. I felt as if I was floating down the main street through all this. And everybody the whole way up to my aunt's was screaming and crying. And when I got to my aunt's some of my cousins came out and brought me in from the gate. They took me into the house. Everybody was distraught. Everybody."

He learned then that Ann had been taken away by ambulance. Within a couple of hours, someone called to the house to say she had died in Mullingar Hospital shortly after 7pm. "It was evident at that stage that she was after having a baby. Everything just descended into chaos," he says.

The local doctor, Dr Tom Donoghue, was called. "I don't know what happened after that. I was sedated. I don't know whether I woke up that evening or the next evening. I lost track of time."

Richard McDonnell was born in Bedford, England, on July 29th, 1966, the second of two sons to Irish-born Austin and Philomena McDonnell. When he was six, his parents' marriage broke down. His father remained in England and his mother returned to Ireland with her two young sons. She took them to live in Granard, where she had family, and rented the council house on Colmcille Terrace.

McDonnell attended primary school in the town, and then spent three years in Granard Tech. He did not take any State exams, and left the tech before the end of summer term in his third year.

In the late spring of that year, in 1981, his father, who had tuberculosis, became ill. His mother left Granard to look after him. McDonnell's older brother had

already left Granard by then for England, where he has lived ever since.

"My mother was gone a couple of weeks," McDonnell says. When his father died in May, he went to Bedford for the funeral, and remained there for the summer. At the end of the summer, the English authorities informed his mother he needed to attend school. Aged 15, he was enrolled in St Thomas More Catholic School, Bedford, but spent less than one term there. He didn't want to stay in school, or in England.

"I had a part-time job in a pub there and I used to collect glasses. I used to serve as well, but I shouldn't have been serving. I saved up a few quid and I told my mother I was going back to Granard and I didn't want to stay in England any more. She was totally against it, but I went ahead and did it anyway."

McDonnell returned to Granard on his own. "I told her I'd be alright, that my aunt was still living there in Granard. And the street, Colmcille's Terrace, you could have walked into anyone's house there and you'd be at home. So I knew I'd be alright."

His mother, who had continued to pay rent on their home, had refused to give him the key, presumably hoping this would encourage him to come back to Bedford. For several months, McDonnell stayed with friends on Colmcille Terrace, and then with a brother of one of those friends. His mother wrote to him frequently during this time, and they also spoke on the phone regularly, but he remained determined to live an independent life in Granard.

McDonnell got work with a local farmer, and ate meals in the farmer's family home. "That man was so good to me," he says. He also worked at the local mart, and with the friend he was staying with, regularly went hunting by day and "lamping" – hunting using lamps – by night. "He used to have hunting dogs; greyhounds and terriers. We used to go hunting, any spare time we had."

The pair hunted for foxes. "We used to get 18 quid for a dog fox," he says. The foxes were passed on to a third party. "A lad up in Cavan, who used to skin the fox for us and then pass them on to the people who'd make coats or jackets from them." They also caught hares. "If we were out

in the daytime with the dogs and we caught a hare, we'd keep it and eat it; make soup and stew."

"At night-time, we used to go lamping hares and would catch them alive, and then they'd be sold to the racing-dog trainers outside of a racing track before the races. The hare's leg would be broken in the car park and it would run away on three legs and they'd let the dogs after it. The dogs would kill it. When the dogs would catch the hare, their temper would be bolstered up and then they'd be brought in for a race, so they'd be fired up for the race."

"And that's what used to happen back then. This is what we done to survive, to get money. I wouldn't dream of doing it now."

One winter night, in 1981, McDonnell and his hunting partner decided to go for a few drinks before going lamping. They went to the Copper Pot on Main Street, where Ann Lovett, then 13, was helping her father Diarmuid behind the bar.

McDonnell was 15. "I was bowled over. Absolutely bowled over," he says, about his first sight of Ann. "I thought she was funny, she was nice looking, she was friendly. I think she liked me immediately as well. It was like love at first sight."

By the time McDonnell left the Copper Pot that evening, he and Ann had arranged to meet later that week. In the 1980s, there were a few established popular places where Granard's teenagers hung out.

"There was a pub down the town, Phil Smith's, which had a pool table in a backroom, and there was the pool hall next door. They had a pool table and a jukebox and a pinball machine. There was a chip shop in the middle of the town. So we would just hang around there. That's where all the young people would hang around."

For the first few months after they met, the two young teenagers hung out at these meeting places.

"At the beginning, we used to meet at the pool hall or the chipper and we'd hang around there smoking fags and having the craic, messing about. And then I'd usually walk her home. It could be 10.30pm or 11pm. It didn't seem to bother Ann that

Richard "Ricky" McDonnell
PORTRAIT: BRENDA FITZSIMONS ©THE IRISH TIMES

she stayed out late. I never seen her parents come out looking for her."

Their friendship deepened. McDonnell describes her character. "Ann was always messing about, always having the craic. She was very sharp, very witty. She could hold her own, she could stand up for herself, about what she thought; she was able to back it up. She was brilliant at drawing. She was intelligent. She was also loving and caring and kind. I could just go on and on, the things to say about her. She was fun to be with; a fun person to be in the company of."

Meanwhile, Philomena McDonnell had resigned herself to the fact her youngest son was not coming back to England, and had sent him the key to the Colmcille Terrace house. He was living there alone.

He says Ann often stayed at his house till late. Despite the fact they were openly boyfriend and girlfriend, McDonnell says he had little to do with Ann's parents Diarmuid and Patricia Lovett.

Was he surprised Ann stayed out so late?

"I was very surprised," McDonnell says. "You'd want to know where your kids are. If you went past nine o'clock at night-time, you'd want to know where they were. I was surprised that there wasn't more about Ann staying out. You would have thought somebody would have stood up and said something. But nothing. It didn't happen."

Shortly after Ann's 14th birthday, on April 6th, 1982, they began a sexual relationship.

"It started to get serious after that," McDonnell says. "She started to come to the house more often and stay later and later as the relationship intensified. It got to the point she was staying with me four or five nights of the week, every week, sometimes going home at 4am or 7am, and I would say virtually everybody in Granard knew that at the time."

They never used contraception. "We were worried, and we tried to take precautions, but hormones take over, and that

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doesn't always happen. We were so in love, we didn't care."

They told each other many times they loved each other. They also often discussed what would happen if Ann became pregnant. She always had the same answer: that she would go to a close family member in Dublin and ask for help.

A fortnight after Ann's 15th birthday in April 1983, McDonnell was home in bed. He'd come in from the mart about 9pm, made a cup of tea, and headed upstairs to bed. The house was heated by a range, which was unlit, and needed an hour or so to get going, so he didn't bother with it when he came in late in the evening. He turned on Radio Luxembourg, and at about 10.15pm, heard banging on the door. It was Ann.

"She was very upset. She was sobbing. I was asking her what was wrong and she was crying."

She told him she had been beaten. "I said to her, look Ann, I'm upstairs in bed, come upstairs and we'll talk. And she wouldn't stop crying. She was crying and sobbing. I held her. She still had her school uniform on."

McDonnell turned the bedroom light on, and asked Ann to show him her injuries. Her thighs were bruised and scuffed. "I just went ballistic. I asked her what happened. And she roared and cried and begged me not to tell anybody, or say anything. She was very distressed. I held her. The two of us cried. She begged me not to tell anybody, not to say anything, not to breathe a word of it."

McDonnell asked Ann if she had been raped. She did not reply. "She just cried. And she begged me not to tell anybody, not to say anything."

After that night, things began to change gradually between the two of them. "The frequency that we would meet wasn't there anymore. We just kind of drifted, those couple of months coming up to the summer."

Ann came to his house no more than half a dozen times after that. They last had sex in early summer of 1983, he says. Their drifting apart was, as McDonnell describes it, "subtle".

"I didn't see it. I just didn't see it." They never formally broke up; there was no break-up conversation. As McDonnell saw it, "I honestly thought we would get back on again. And I had asked her several times, and tried, but I got the impression she was pushing me away. Nobody knew what was coming down the road."

The first time McDonnell became aware of the rumours that Ann was pregnant was, he believes, October. He recalls exactly where he was when he first heard. "I was standing in the doorway of Paddy O'Hara's pub with a group of lads, and Ann was coming from the shops, and she walked past us and said hello to everybody and as she walked away, one of the lads said, 'She doesn't look pregnant to me.' And that's when the penny dropped for me. That was the first I had heard of it. Or even suspected that anybody had rumours or anything about her."

Shocked, he asked her straight out if she was pregnant the next time he saw her. "She denied it. That was the way it was for any other kind of meeting that we had. I'd broach the subject and she'd laugh it off, or she'd say, she'd just put on a bit of weight, and she was embarrassed."

McDonnell says he asked Ann seven or eight times after that if she was pregnant, and each time, she denied it. "She just didn't look pregnant," he says. "I told her several times that if she was pregnant, that I would stand by her."

Given that it was possible he was the father, was he surprised Ann did not tell him she was pregnant? McDonnell shakes his head in bafflement. "I don't understand that." He says he will never understand why Ann did not confide in him.

The last time McDonnell saw Ann was either on Stephen's Night 1983, or New Year's Eve. They had both travelled separately to the Fountain Blue Nightclub, between Edgeworthstown and Longford. McDonnell got a lift with friends Martin Kelly and Brendan Martin.

At the end of the evening, Ann took a lift with them back to Granard. "That was the last time I seen Ann. I had probably had a few bevies as well [at the nightclub]; pints of lager. We shouldn't have been drinking at all. We were under age. We dropped her off at her house. We probably went back to Martin Kelly's house afterwards. I don't remember. It didn't stand out at the time. We didn't know what was going to happen."

On January 31st, 1984, a Tuesday, Ann Rose Lovett did not go to school. She was nine months pregnant; a full-term pregnancy that both her parents were to state at her inquest they had had no knowledge of. She was found about 4pm that afternoon by three passing schoolboys, post-childbirth, semi-conscious in the grounds of the grotto that adjoined Granard's Catholic church. She died later in Mullingar hospital.

On Thursday, February 2nd, the day of the removal to St Mary's Church, McDonnell and a friend wanted to go to the mortuary in Mullingar hospital, where Ann was reposing, but they had no transport.

They walked down past the mart, and out along the road known locally as Ball Alley, intending to hitch a lift. There were two priests in the parish at the time. Canon Francis Gillfillan was the parish priest and lived at the parochial house beside the church. Fr John Quinn, the Catholic curate, had been appointed to Granard parish in the summer of 1980. It struck McDonnell and his friend that Fr



Quinn, who lived at the end of Ball Alley, might also be going to Mullingar, and could give them a lift.

"And as we crossed over the road, and approached the bend, we met all the Lovett brothers. They were coming from Fr Quinn's house. This is like half-past 10 in the morning, 11 o'clock, something like that. And I thought it was the end for me. I thought I was going to die. We walked straight into them. And they threw their arms around me and hugged me. All of them. We all cried. They told me not to blame myself."

There were a lot of people at the mortuary, McDonnell says. "All I saw was her face, her hands. It was just unbelievable, was what it was," McDonnell recalls, still visibly upset at the memory. "It was just unbelievable. I kissed her. I don't remember much about the rest of the day."

The funeral took place the following day. McDonnell went to the church, but found himself unable to go in. "I wasn't able. I don't know how I ended up in the graveyard, but I ended up in the graveyard with me and cousins, and I think I was taken away halfway through the burial. I just couldn't. I just couldn't handle it."

In the days immediately following the funeral, Mrs Lovett invited two of Ann's friends, Róisín and Fiona*, to take some of her belongings as mementoes. As Róisín recalls: "Her Mam said we could go upstairs and if there was anything that we wanted to take out of the room, we could have it. She didn't come up to the room with us."

The two friends went upstairs with Patricia Lovett, Ann's younger sister, with whom she had shared a bedroom. They looked around the room, and took a few trinkets: some of the novelty soaps Ann had liked to collect, including Snoopy and Woodstock figurines; a silver bracelet with her name on it; earrings.

"And then we found a case under Ann's bed and we opened the case," Róisín says. It was a small suitcase, full of the kinds of personal treasures teenage girls hoard. Among them were two sealed envelopes. One had the name "Ricky" written on it, in what they recognised as Ann's handwriting. The other envelope was blank.

"We opened the one with no name on it," Fiona says. The three of them sat on the bed together, and read it. "I can't say who it was for, or if there was 'Dear Mam', or anything like that. I don't know. I only remember that the first few lines were, 'If I'm not dead by the 31st of January, I'm going to kill myself anyway.' Fiona is adamant that she remembers these words. "Those are the lines that have stuck with me all these years. And that's the absolute truth."

What Róisín remembers jumping out at her from the letter was, "Everybody would be better off. People will be better off when this happens. It's better this way." That kind of a gist in a couple of sentences. That's what hopped out at me."

Patricia Lovett brought the two letters downstairs to her mother. It was some time later that, McDonnell says, Mrs Lovett and her eldest daughter, Louise, paid a visit to the house where he was staying with relations. He says they were in tears and very upset when they came into the kitchen, and told McDonnell they had found a letter addressed to him from Ann. It had been opened, he says.

Louise Lovett handed him the envelope and both Lovetts told him it was not his fault. "And I sat down at the table and tried to read it and I just went to pieces. I was emotionally shredded. I couldn't stop crying. I read it. I broke down. They left." McDonnell says there were two sheets of paper, with writing on three sides. "I only read the letter once because I just lost it. But the gist of the letter was, how much

I asked her what happened. And she roared and begged me not to tell anybody. She was very distressed. I held her. The two of us cried. She begged me not to breathe a word

that Ann had loved me, and how sorry she was for doing what she was going to do. She had never meant to hurt me. That she had loved me. That the reason she was doing it was that nobody would believe I was the father of that child."

What does McDonnell think Ann meant when she wrote she was sorry for what she was going to do?

"It was obvious what she was going to do. She went up to the Palms, to the grotto, to have that baby. Ann wasn't stupid. She could have walked into any place, anywhere in Granard, and said, 'I'm having a baby,' and they would have called her an ambulance. Anybody would have done that. Anybody that's logical would have done that. But she didn't. She went to the grotto. And she done that for a reason. That isn't an accident. This was not about her going off somewhere quiet on her own. That is not Ann Lovett. That's not Ann. Ann could have gone to any woman in Granard. And they would have got her help."

"So to me, this was a protest, on her behalf. That's what I feel. I don't believe any other thing. Ann just wasn't like that. She could have got help anywhere, and she would have got plenty of help. This is well out of her character to do this. In the letter, she said she was sorry for what she was going to do. None of it adds up. I knew Ann better than anybody. And no way would she have gone to the Palms on her own, to have a baby, because she could have asked anybody for help, anybody, and they would have helped her. It's just unbelievable."

About two hours later, Fr Quinn arrived at the house, McDonnell says. "He had heard that Mrs Lovett and Louise had come down to the house and had a letter that Ann had written. He demanded to see it."

Fr Quinn and McDonnell went into the sitting room together, where the priest read the letter twice. "Then he turned round and put it into my hand, and said, 'Burn that letter. Because that's going to cause so much trouble. It'll destroy the town,' he said. And I burned it."

The story of Ann's death had gained national media attention and reporters were all over the town. Philomena McDonnell came over from Bedford, at the request of Granard garda. The evening of the day she returned, word was sent that McDonnell was to be interviewed at the

barracks on Main Street. His mother went with him, but when McDonnell gave his statement, only he and Det John Murren were present in the room.

"He asked me everything. He asked me every question under the sun. The times we had sex. Where we had sex. Did I know anybody else who had had sex with Ann. Was there anybody that I suspected. Did she have any other boyfriends. And then I told him about the assault and what had happened."

Det Murren said nothing about the assault, McDonnell says; he just continued to write down the statement. At the end of what he thinks was a 60 to 90 minute interview, McDonnell read and signed it. He was not given a copy.

"It was probably the next day then that Fr Quinn came down to me auntie's and said he wanted to take me off; that the bishop wanted to see me in Longford. He said the bishop wanted to hear my story. I'm not a religious person. I thought it was very odd, but I knew it was very serious as well."

At the time, the Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise was Colm O'Reilly, who held the post from February 24th, 1983, until he resigned on July 17th, 2013.

McDonnell says that he and Fr Quinn went into a room in the Bishop's Palace, with the bishop and another member of clergy associated with the bishop, whose name McDonnell did not know. "He [the bishop] wanted to know what I had told the guards," McDonnell repeated everything he had told Det Murren the day before, including the part about the assault.

"There was some kind of discussion at the end of it, between Fr Quinn and him and the other person. I was sitting there at the table as well. I just wasn't listening to me. I was miles away. The bishop told me he was swearing me to a vow of silence. And that I would have to kiss the seal of St Peter and he held out his hand with his bishop's ring. I was never to breathe a word of it again, he said."

In response, Bishop O'Reilly told *The Irish Times* in a statement he had never met Ricky McDonnell.

Within a day or two at most, but before his mother left Granard, McDonnell says Fr Quinn told him he wanted to take him away from the town because of the press. They spent three days driving around Ulster, McDonnell says; first to Donegal,

then Antrim, then Belfast. Both overnights, one in Malin Head and the second near Ballycastle, were spent in private houses, owned by people known to Fr Quinn.

By the time they arrived back in Granard, Philomena McDonnell had left. She had been in Granard less than three days. During that time the authorities had "demanded the key back off me mother", McDonnell says. This effectively rendered McDonnell homeless from the house he had lived in since the age of six. "That's when he [Fr Quinn] said I could have a room in his house."

The inquest into the death of Ann Lovett and her son, who had been baptised Patrick, was held on February 21st, 1984. A Garda file had been sent to coroner Patrick Mangan. Her mother Patricia Lovett's evidence stated that there was "no trouble" at home. Diarmuid Lovett testified that the "family was united".

The *Westmeath Examiner's* report of the inquest stated "he and his wife were aware their daughter had a boyfriend and had advised her against seeing this boy because of her age. Replying to Dr Patrick Mangan, county coroner, Mr Lovett said he was sure if their children had any difficulties, they would have discussed them with his wife and himself. . . Mrs Lovett said [of Ann] she appeared to take the advice we gave her concerning her boyfriend."

McDonnell was not called to give evidence at the inquest, nor asked to attend. Cause of death for Ann was given by pathologist Kevin Cunnane as irreversible shock, due to a combination of exposure and blood loss in childbirth. Despite extensive efforts by *The Irish Times*, the current whereabouts and contents of the Garda file in relation to Ann Lovett's death, if still in existence, could not be established.

During this period, McDonnell says he was working for Fr Quinn, doing odd jobs around the church grounds; weeding and painting. He was still living in Fr Quinn's house when, in the early morning of Easter Sunday on April 22nd, 1984, Patricia Lovett (14), died by suicide.

McDonnell had been one of the last people to see Patricia alive. He says Fr Quinn had driven him and Patricia home from a dance at the Mickey Mouse Club in Edgeworthstown in the early hours of Easter Sunday.

At the inquest into the death of Patricia Lovett on July 16th, 1984, Mrs Lovett stated she had gone to bed at midnight, and her husband at 3am. (Diarmuid Lovett had since had a heart attack and was unable to attend the inquest.) *The Irish Times* of April 23rd had reported that "the Granard curate, Fr Quinn, drove Patricia and a boy back to Granard and dropped her off at her home at about 2.45am".

Mrs Lovett stated at the inquest that after her husband had come to bed at 3am, he had woken her later that night to say Patricia was crying.

Pathologist Kevin Cunnane found that Patricia had died from an overdose. She had been pronounced dead before 5am by the local doctor, Dr Donoghue. The pathologist also told the inquest that there was a bruise on the left side of her chin and an abrasion on her left cheek.

After Patricia Lovett's death, McDonnell felt his continued presence in Granard "was a reminder to everybody" of the double tragedy of the Lovett sisters.

McDonnell says Fr Quinn took him to Dublin that summer to meet Patrick Cooney, then minister for defence and a TD whose constituency was Longford-Westmeath. "He [Fr Quinn] explained who I was to Patrick Cooney and

Left: What is believed to be the first photo to be made public of Ann Lovett: 'I was bowled over. Absolutely bowled over,' says Ricky McDonnell of his first sight of Ann. Below: the grotto where 15-year-old Ann Lovett gave birth
PHOTOGRAPHS: © COPYRIGHT THE IRISH TIMES/BRENDA FITZSIMONS

what had happened," McDonnell says. "He said I had been interested in joining the Army when younger and would it be possible to put my name on the recruiting list." McDonnell recalls Cooney telling him to stay out of trouble and made no promises to him.

Cooney told *The Irish Times* he had never met Ricky McDonnell and had "no recollection of any incident like that". However, solicitors for Fr Quinn said their client recalled bringing McDonnell to an appointment with Cooney.

The pressure became too much for McDonnell, and he left Granard for Bedford. After a few weeks, a letter arrived, via the home of a relative, requesting him to present for a medical for the Army. "Back then, if you were called for a medical and passed it, you knew you'd made it through," he says.

McDonnell enlisted in the Army in August 1984, not long after his 18th birthday. "I enjoyed the training and Army life, but my mind was engulfed by the death of Ann," he says. "I often thought of ending it all when alone and armed but the thought of what I would be leaving behind for my relatives and friends stopped me from going through with it."

He remained in the Army until requesting a discharge at the end of three years. After that, he returned to England, and began working as a plasterer.

The impact of the traumatic events in Granard in 1984 continued to haunt him throughout his sometimes troubled adult life. He drank to excess for many years, until giving up alcohol more than a decade ago. "I drank to forget everything," as he puts it. "I couldn't settle into a relationship for fear of rejection, or from becoming too emotionally connected with another girl for fear of messing everything up again."

For years, he kept silent. "I was scared of them; I was spooked by what happened to me that day [at the Bishop's Palace]; I thought something bad would happen to me."

Then, as the decades unfolded, his continued silence was out of respect for Patricia Lovett senior, a mother who had lost two daughters in unimaginably tragic and public circumstances.

Patricia Lovett died in 2015; Diarmuid Lovett had died in 1987.

When *The Irish Times* contacted Patrick Cooney and asked if he had ever met Ricky McDonnell, he said, "No". When asked if he had helped recruit him into the Army, he replied: "I have no recollection of any incident like that at all," adding, "anyway, I couldn't offer to recruit him into the Army; he would have had to go through the recruitment process."

Fr Quinn is now a parish priest in rural Co Leitrim. *The Irish Times* called on him at his home, and left a letter with a number of questions. He replied through his solicitors, who stated Fr Quinn "had made it clear that he felt it was inappropriate that he should be contacted in this way".

The Irish Times then submitted a number of questions through Fr Quinn's solicitors. In summary, these questions included the following: after the death of Ann Lovett, had Fr Quinn read a letter from her addressed to McDonnell and instructed him to burn it? Had he driven McDonnell to Longford after he had given his Garda statement to see the then bishop, Colm O'Reilly? Had McDonnell been asked by any person to swear an oath of secrecy about his statement? Had McDonnell travelled with Fr Quinn to Ulster at this time? Had Fr Quinn accompanied McDonnell to Dublin to see Patrick Cooney, to solicit for McDonnell's recruitment to the Army?

Fr Quinn, through his solicitors, confirmed he knew McDonnell and that he had tried to assist him.

Fr Quinn's solicitors stated: "Our client has no knowledge of a letter written by the late Ann Lovett and accordingly did not request to see such a letter. . . our client did not drive Mr McDonnell to see Bishop O'Reilly and this meeting did not take place with Bishop O'Reilly and the suggestion by Mr McDonnell that he was requested to swear an oath of secrecy about a statement which is on the Garda file and therefore on the record is absurd and erroneous. . . There was an intense level of media coverage of events in Granard and it was decided that Mr McDonnell needed a short break and this was arranged in consultation with his relatives. . . He travelled to Donegal with our client and stayed with relatives of our client. . . Mr McDonnell expressed an interest in joining the Irish Army and he made the necessary application and representations were made on his behalf and arising from the representations our client brought Mr McDonnell to an appointment with Mr Cooney."

The former Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, Colm O'Reilly, resigned in 2013. *The Irish Times* put a number of questions to him. Now Bishop Emeritus, he issued a statement in response via the Catholic Communications Office. "Bishop O'Reilly has never met, or communicated, with Mr Richard McDonnell. Bishop O'Reilly has never asked anyone to meet or communicate with Mr McDonnell on his behalf."

The Irish Times made repeated efforts to contact members of the Lovett family, but they did not respond.

Ricky McDonnell is unsure how his story will be received, but he says it is time his voice is finally heard. "I'm now hoping that other people will come forward and tell what they know about that time," he says. "What kind of signal is it that we are sending out to our children, that it is OK to brush things away under the carpet and remain silent for decades?"

* Róisín and Fiona are pseudonyms. Their identities are known to *The Irish Times*.

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She was found about 4pm by three passing schoolboys, post-childbirth, semi-conscious in the grounds of the grotto. She died later in Mullingar hospital