

Mountaineering

K2's terror and beauty: on top of the magic carpet of the world



Keith Duggan

Donegal man Jason Black is one of very few people to have made it to the summit of the second-highest peak on Earth

The Karakoram highway, running along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, is one of the most spectacular and dangerous roads on the planet. It's a feat of human engineering and folly, four thousand metres above sea level, precarious and prone to landslides.

In the summer of 2015, Jason Black was among a group of elite mountaineers travelling by bus to attempt to climb K2. Two Ford pick-ups, each carrying six hired security men armed with AK-47s, formed a cavalcade. A guy beside him sat with a Glock gun on his lap. Black felt excited and solemn. There was something dissonant about the journey. Climbing is personal and has an undeniable spiritual dimension. But this day felt heavy. The security wasn't a western conceit. Just two years earlier, eleven climbers had been accosted in a night camp at Nanga Parbat and executed on the spot by Taliban militants.

"They were camping in this village high in the mountains and they killed them," Black says. "They shot them dead because they were westerners. And now we were on the same bus."

Sitting towards the front of the bus was a climber Black reveres, Monique Richards, the Canadian woman, one of the most accomplished on the planet.

"We were travelling for about four days and pulled into this village for a break and to get some fresh fruit. And the suppression that women in some of these villages endured was just... we went through this one village where from the day a woman was born until she died never got outside other than to leave the family home for the marital home. So we were stopped in a village. And all of a sudden this mob came around the bus, pulled the driver out and nearly killed him stone dead with a post because he allowed Monique to sit in the front of the bus. He had allowed a woman to sit in front of men, in other words. So getting to the K2 is nearly as dangerous as climbing it."

But not quite. The American physicist and mid-century mountaineer George Bell is credited with naming K2 'the savage mountain'. Its austerity and technical difficulty means it will never become Disneyfied or hawked to leisure climbers. Nearly 5,000 people – including Black, on the north face – have climbed to the summit of Everest. Just 340 have stood on top of the K2. It commands a dark, crude statistic: for every four people who summit, one person dies.

Valour

Only one other Irish man, Ger McDonnell, had ever made it to the summit. That was on August 1st, 2008 when, just hours after the euphoria of standing on the summit, McDonnell perished along with 10 others in one of the worst disasters in mountaineering history. After a deluge of conflicting and international reports, it was established that McDonnell had behaved with extraordinary valour during a catastrophic night-time descent, re-ascending alone through the pitch dark to free tangled Korean climbers. It is thought that McDonnell was at some point struck by falling ice and died.

Black was partially motivated to honour McDonnell. But he would have to wait for three more years. The 2015 attempt was cancelled after an avalanche. He finally made it to the summit in July of 2018, along with Co Down climber Noel Hanna. His gripping account is an unnerving cocktail of terror and beauty which seems to attract extreme athletes.

Like the rest of the world, Black has spent much of the past year housebound. He has been training for his next calling: a solo crossing of the Atlantic, starting at St John's in Canada and finishing in his native Donegal. No safety boat. Just him. When we speak by video, he has come in from a few hours on the bike.

It's a sublime April evening in the north-west: faraway skies with big streaks of colour. Black speaks in the unaffected drawl of mid-Donegal which can make everything seem casual. But there's no escaping the reverence in his voice when he takes himself back to the apex of that climb. If he speaks in the present tense, it's because, you suspect, that part of him is always there.

"You read about House Chimney and the Serac on K2 and I've watched it on film. But, you know, I'll be honest: there is nothing that prepares you for that thing. It is the most frightening thing that you can imagine. And it takes you to a place of such discomfort. As an athlete, to have the skill set to survive it is unbelievable. It is minus 20. The regulator is frozen over and then your gums start to freeze. My mask is getting covered up.

"I get to One Man's Pass which is at the bottom of the Serac. It's just a very narrow



Jason Black climbing K2 after the bottleneck en route to the summit shoulder. Below from left: holding the Tricolour at the summit in July 2018; on K2 with a memorial to Ger McDonnell; and a Black family photo of Billy, Dervla, Tanya and Jason. Inset below: the top of 'the savage mountain'



ledge. There is a Japanese climber right in front of me. And he just falls. He just falls two and a half thousand metres right in front of my eyes. He falls to his death. And you are just watching this happen. And you exist. And you have this unnerving conversation where you are just telling yourself to keep moving forward; that you can't do anything about what is after happening. And then you turn the corner and you are on the last push, which is about 14 hours long."

Camp Four sits at 7,900 metres. The bottleneck climb to the summit is 700 metres further. At that altitude the body is so oxygen deprived that the digestive system shuts down. Oxygen levels in the blood drop to 14 per cent. Humans shouldn't be there. It's a gamble.

"So your cognisance is very limited.

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All the planes, the 747s, they are flying either level or below you. So it is a 'sweet Jesus' moment. Those last two days are when you are beyond your physical capability and beyond who you are as a human being

When you do get there, it's not a rush. You don't have that mental capacity. It is more: I am not going to miss this view. You are top of the magic carpet of the world. And you are looking in on this glass fishbowl of the world. That is what it looks like. All the planes, the 747s, they are flying either level or below you.

"So it is a 'sweet Jesus' moment. Those last two days are when you are beyond your physical capability and beyond who you are as a human being."

Ger McDonnell, who had stood there 10 years earlier, was on his mind. He felt his presence.

"And I had a very unnerving experience then where I had to talk to myself for an

hour, tell myself I'd be ok. You are so tired. And you say: Jesus what are you doing this for?"

It's a question that Black has only begun to answer. He celebrated his 50th birthday recently. He had an outdoor beer with his dad. "And I just thanked him." Jason's father is called Tanya Black. His brother, whom the family lost in a motorcycle accident in Philly in 1997, was Billy Black. Their grandfather was Billy Black. Their great-grandfather was Billy Black. All four men were motor mechanics and shared an obsession with engines, with bikes, with cars.

'Mischief'

Something of the answer as to why Black climbs forbidding peaks or cycles continents is to be found in those lost days in the late 1970s on the edges of Letterkenny. He was the eldest of four: then came Billy, Dervla and Tanya. Just as a biblical seam runs through the heart of America, there's a streak of petroleum that leaves an indelible trace across mid-Ulster.

"I don't know why but we all have it. My son is Billy – and he has it too! Part of it was Dad fixing cars at the side of the house. Driving a car at seven, my own motorbike at eight. We had full race go-karts at 11 years old. And as fast as it sounds, we were going 10 miles down the road on these carts. And I don't know if Mum and Dad were right or wrong. But they gave us these kinds of adventures and that is what unlocked this thing in me. Everything seemed possible because of what they gave us."

His brother, he says, was "just mischief" and he laughs now when he remembers the spirit: a kid entrepreneur gamely selling Armagh apples from a horse box aged 11.

"He was his own person, gathering his own money – and he was reckless in how he spent it. Billy was born with a murmur in his heart and he had so much energy. He bounced continually. Billy was the better athlete. He was lighter than me. But he couldn't see the sense in training continually whereas I did. In our family the rest of us

would always hug each other and say that we loved each other. Billy was more reserved about that. But then, when he did say it, he really meant it."

Donegal couldn't contain Billy Black. Like many of his generation, he looked west. Seamus Fay, a family friend, had been in Philly for 20 years and gave him a sofa, a framework. "He created a wonderful circle out there and knew the geography and the politics of the city and he just fitted in seamlessly."

He came home the week before Jason married Sharon McCool, a local girl. Because they were young and couldn't afford a honeymoon, Billy invited the couple out to Philly for a week. He showed them the town royally. It was a blast.

"Then, Billy went out for a run on the bike just before we left. And he just got it wrong on a corner and crashed and was killed."

Jason had to tell his father on the phone. He can hear the excitement in the voice still. How's it going over there son? And then this terrible transatlantic silence. The family had already lost their mother Freda to cancer when Jason was 17.

"And when we lost him, I lost a part of me. We were best friends and arch enemies growing up. We would kill each other. Mammy would always make homemade chips on a Saturday night. And homemade onion rings in the deep fat fryer. But it wasn't a deep fat fryer; it was just a pot with hot oil. Even if you were leaving the table, to go to the loo we'd pretend to spit in our chips because the other would have them eaten."

He's laughing. Brothers that they were, Jason never did tell Billy about what was the true test of his life. His five years in secondary school was a hell that shaped him. He was singled out by another kid in his year and bullied to the stage where he was a husk. It was the early 1980s: the rules of engagement were rowdier. What Black recalls now is the newness of those first few days in secondary school in St Eunan's. "I had a brand new bag for the first time.

And new books that weren't hand-me-downs. I can still see the new sharpener and pencils. And that bollocks just destroyed it all. I still remember walking through those gates. And within two weeks, I was in this unmerciful black hole. I didn't have the skills to deal with it and I don't think the teachers at the time did either."

Five years of casual psychological torture awaited him. Black was a green belt in judo, fighting up in Ulster at weekends, but was helpless against this and spoke to nobody. All joy was eroded. Why him? He's not sure but maybe it's because he was from outside of town and identifiable as a bumpkin. Maybe in those first weeks, the uniform was too pristine and he lined up too eagerly.

"I was smaller than I am and wasn't

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Am I reckless? No. Am I in the hands of God? Yeah. Am I in the hands of Mother Nature? But we have endless opportunity and potential in this country. So I'm just trying to be a cog in a wheel and encourage people to live a better life

streetwise and I was probably very obedient. The individual involved was from town and had older brothers so he had all that education and street craft handed down to him."

A combination of shame and not wanting to hassle his parents made him hide it. The family wasn't flush. "My Mum just put these amazing dinners up from a fridge that could be very empty sometimes."

So Black put on a mask and acted through his teens. Then his Mum got sick and, to their lasting disbelief, died. He left school with no real qualifications to speak of.

It all left Black floating through the mid-1980s. He was certain that he had

nothing to offer. "I was completely disabled. I was struggling massively. And for a long time, I was planning on checking out of this world."

Funny, intervention came not through heroic races or super endurance but through stacking shelves. See him in Dunnes now one morning, just glad to have a job, any job, where he's inconspicuous. And a call comes through to the office from Pauric Murray, a Cadbury's rep from Galway and a terrific lad. The roads are terrible: he can't make it up to do the order. And he wants Jason to do it.

Kindness

Black gets the stock cart but he hasn't a clue what to do. Dan McTeague, the Jacobs rep, happens to be in the store room. He shows Black how to fill in a stock order on the sheet. Then Black crosses the road to the public phone box and rings the order through. It's a success. A few weeks later, Pauric Murray calls him again. There's a sales rep job going with Cadbury's. He urges Black to go for it. "And I just didn't feel worthy of it. Not at all."

But there he is, on a CIE bus to Coolock in Dublin – still the most nerve-wracking journey of his life. He remembers every second of the interview and the feeling when Gary O'Bray, then the head of sales, offered him the job.

"I was just blown away," Black says quietly. "I had never, ever been offered anything like this in my life." If he speaks about this episode with more weight and intensity than any of the more extreme feats, it's because it matters most to him. Those casual acts of kindness genuinely saved him. "I was off my knees," he says now.

Things began to happen fast. Black is sociable at heart and a born communicator. There's a mad story about a "white lie" he told about his driving licence that day in Coolock. After six good years with Cadbury's, he was approached by Cuisine de France, then a start-up, and ended up spending time in Minnesota to study the to-go food culture of petrol station forecourts. After a chance conversation, he and Sharon bought a small corner shop in town.

"We didn't have two pennies to rub together. But Sharon was studying accountancy. And I knew retail."

They took out a bank loan and the returns smashed the three-year plan. They bought other shops, then a local nightclub and suddenly had a staff of 185 people with a turnover of over 10 million quid.

"There was something that I do owe the bully. I had no fear left. I didn't fear debt or worry. But you know, we let them all go. I felt I had lost purpose. I'm afraid I got into the Jones end of things and buying the material things – houses, cars holidays and all that. I was adapting again as a person. I was working with the Irish Red Cross at the time. And that kind of... changed things for me. Sold it all up, paid off my debts to the bank and we walked away with a few quid. Not a lot but enough."

Fifty years in, it turns out that Jason Black is a born motor mechanic, too. It took him decades to take himself apart. It was during that first time in the camps on K2 that he had time to properly revisit those school years.

He has spoken about this once in a harrowing radio interview: in the tent, at those eerie heights, screaming for hours. For his mother, for the lost years, for all of it. The lad who bullied him physically faded from his life the day they left school. But this, 20 years on in Pakistan, was an exorcism.

"You know, on reflection I don't think the bully knew he was the bully. I have never named him and I don't need to now. I don't wish ill acts to fall on anyone. But karma did catch up with him. I don't need to confront him and I don't think he would even remember it, to be honest."

And that is the part that frightens Jason Black: the casual damage that people visit on each other. On his website, there's a short audio clip he recorded from the summit of K2 that is at once beautiful and sad. It's just two minutes. And it's an ode to Ger McDonnell and heartfelt message to his wife and children and the Black family as well as a rasping reflection of the natural miracle before his eyes.

But for the listener, it's more the sound of his voice that catches – the exhaustion and pride and ego and vulnerability all clashing like heaven symbols. It's spoken from a place that very few human beings ever have or will stand; fewer than have been to the moon. He survived. He got there.

'Dream stealers'

"The reason I keep the adventures so alive is that they are like a shop window. People can see and hear the message," he says now.

"Am I reckless? No. Am I in the hands of God? Yeah. Am I in the hands of Mother Nature? But we have endless opportunity and potential in this country. So I'm just trying to be a cog in a wheel and encourage people to live a better life and to have the courage to walk in their own shoes and do whatever it is they want to do. I want to be an enabler and I want to stop the dream stealers. I had enough of those in life."

So he tells his story. From time to time, he goes back to the old school. He stands in that very classroom in St Eunan's. It's a different place now, a school he thinks he'd love. Having in him to talk about his experiences is proof of that. He still gets nervous as a child standing in front of a class and that's what he wants to explain. Everyone has their obstacles. My name is Jason Black, he tells them.

Sea swimming

Planet's deepest, darkest waters is where Moore feels most alive



Keith Duggan

Donegal woman knows the dangers of the deep but draw of the unknown is hard to resist

I don't go in there to face the beast or to look for trouble," Nuala Moore says in explaining why she swims through the most dangerous and forbidding waters on the planet. By "in there" she is talking about the parts of the ocean that most of us prefer to never think about: nightmares and blackness stuff. She is talking about her odyssey across the Bering Strait seven years ago, lowering herself into pitch black waters at four in the morning with a vicious polar wind and banishing the thought of the sea monsters beneath. Or the day in Murmansk when she became just the third ever woman to swim for one mile at zero degrees. The air temperature was minus 33 degrees. "I went into that swim cocky," she can admit now.

"And then I swam the first 150 metres and I thought I was going to die – the tightness of your chest, the sense of not being able to breathe. The impact on my mental state was total."

By "in there" she means the round-Ireland swim in which she participated in 2006: five swimmers covering 1,330 kilometres without wetsuits over 56 days. Her shoulder muscles were so torn up after the final leg that a full year passed before she could fully raise her arms above her shoulders.

She has swum across the Rio de La Platte from Uruguay to Argentina as part of a relay team. She won the first Russian ice championships in Krasnoyarsk four years ago. She's one of the very few people on earth to have swam the Drake Passage, the marine equivalent of the Bermuda Triangle in that it has been, since it was discovered in the late 1500s by Drake (who was much too crafty to ever sail it himself), one of the most notorious patches of ocean on the planet.

For centuries, the name spooked sailors: 650 miles wide at its widest and the ocean bed three kilometres down. The particular stretch of water that fascinated Nuala Moore lies at 55 degrees south. "If you rotate the world on its axis, there is no land east or west as the world turns. Just water. And you have three oceans – the Pacific, the Atlantic and the Arctic meeting."

You can still hear the fascination in her voice, as if the mere fact of this is sufficient explanation as to why she sat in her shop in Dingle, plotting and planning as to how she might raise the king's ransom needed to make it happen.

She's one of the most decorated and accomplished sea swimmers alive but doesn't have sponsorship and doesn't hawk herself on social media. She has records and accolades but isn't particularly driven by either. It's more of a spark or a vision of herself swimming in the remote waters of the earth.

Just reaching the Drake Passage required a 14-hour journey in a simple fishing vessel with her small support team. And it was only when they arrived that the complications started.

Rogue waves

There's a lighthouse keeper down there who has to grant permission for anything – or anyone – passing through. And although he was convinced by Moore's reputation that she could complete the swim, he wasn't going to allow the Zodiac – the hard-shell dinghy – to travel alongside her. He wasn't willing to risk the lives of the medics in a stretch of water defined by unpredictable rogue waves. If she was to swim it, then the fishing vessel would have to follow her, monitoring her progress from a couple of hundred metres away.

"And so I had to go down stairs and I had my Child of Prague and all my medals and had a committee meeting with everyone there and I just had to decide. What if they lose sight of me? And if they lose sight of me then I will die. I'd have a two hour survival time and I wouldn't find land in that time. So I did cry. For about 15 minutes. And you realise this is why you are here. And there is a trust."

"But yeah, fear is a real aspect. It becomes a fuel. I mean there are a lot of people, myself included, who get through nights and say please let the light come. And then you just get up in the morning and get on with it. Because there is a fear attached to life as well as times. And once my tears dried I thought: no, this is what I am built for. You think: This is me. I am metal. I am powerful. And you just let go. It was only a mile swim but for those 32 minutes I had to hold on as tight as ever I could. I actually sang Christy Moore's St Brendan's Voyage as I swam."

There's some unsteady, Blair-Witchy footage of her taken from the safety boat as she swims and it's striking precisely because it's impossible to see her: just a pin moving through choppy grey bleak water. Even the untutored eye can quickly sense just how precarious the mission was.



■ Clockwise from above: Nuala Moore at a glacier in Italy for a two kilometre swim in three degree water; Swimming the Beagle Channel with Chile in the background. And at Pedlar's Coom, Conor Pass, where she trains in the lake.
PHOTOGRAPHS: NUALA MOORE, VALERIE O'SULLIVAN



It's funny. Sometimes she'll look out her window in Dingle and scan the weather charts and decide that it's a day for the fire: that only a lunatic would go for a swim on a day like that. It's the old Irish sensibility. But then, something within impels her to these quests that place her in rare waters where the margin for error is slim. Once or twice, she has scared herself. She actually sat down with a priest she knew years ago to try and figure it all out. What was compelling her to swim in these places? Why was she drawn to them?

"And I was laughing but I told him: do an exorcism. Get this girl out of me."

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What if they lose sight of me? And if they lose sight of me then I will die. I'd have a two hour survival time and I wouldn't find land in that time. So I did cry. For about 15 minutes. And you realise this is why you are here. And there is a trust

She has no rational explanation but suspects it's a simple matter of hereditary inclinations and has settled the issue in her mind with a simple question.

"What possesses any of us to do anything?"

She was born in Donegal into fishing families – the Moores and the McGowans. In 1939, her grandfather Ned Moore took his boat, Mulroy Bay, from Dingle up the coast to Killybegs. There was just one other boat in the Donegal port then, belonging to Francie McCallig. Ned Moore lived in Killybegs for 17 years as the port and town underwent a transformation before returning to Dingle. Nuala's father Benny

also fished for all of his life.

When she was a child she'd sit at the window at home looking out onto the bay waiting for her father's boat to come in. The sea fascination is in the blood and runs deeper than mere articulation.

Her father did not swim: he was of the generation that felt, if the worst happened, fated to go down with a vessel. She remembers seeing pictures of the boats coming back into the harbour in Killybegs in 1965 after Hurricane Debbie. They used this phrase: "it was a bit of a whisper". The drama and danger was always downplayed but the respect for the sea was immense. "You never take your eye off it," her father would say to her again and again.

Tragedy hasn't struck her family but there's hardly a fishing family in Ireland who hasn't been affected by loss. In more recent years, after he began to fail, she cared for him and he'd listen as she'd recount sea swimming expeditions that became longer and more extreme by the year.

"He had no great respect for the ice but once you spoke about sea swimming, he was fascinated by it. He always used to say, 'remember, a storm cannot hit you on four sides.' In other words, keep pushing. You will find some calm. And then they would tuck in and come home when the storm passed. Drive into the storm because a wave can take you from any side but it can't take you from the front."

It's been seven years since the Bering Strait swim. That was a different challenge in that she was part of a big, international relay team. They travelled on a Russian military hospital ship with military staff. Multitudes of languages between the team and crew of 66 people but they always found a way to communicate.

She flew halfway around the world with Ann-Marie Ward, the Donegal woman who became the first Irish woman to swim the North Channel (a 19-hour endeavour, completed on her second attempt. She had to abandon her first swim when the jellyfish stings became health threatening). The pair are fast friends and they put this down as a once in a lifetime swim.

At its narrowest the Bering Strait is just

85 kilometres. The team swam from Cape Dezhnev, on the Russian side, to Cape Prince of Wales in Alaska. The expedition was a weird combination of unforgettably comradely and incredibly lonely. Progress was painstaking: at one stage, the relay team managed 600 metres in five hours. And they had some of the fastest open water swimmers in the world on that ship.

They swam for 15 minute stretches, heading out on the dinghy at all hours and then sliding over the side of the boat. They wore swimsuits, not wetsuits. The actual water temperature didn't feel much different to getting into the Irish winter sea. But it's everything that goes with it. The cutting winds, the uncaring remoteness of the place and the knowledge they all had of what swam in those waters – the great whales, the toothed walrus.

"You can build that monster in your mind but then you have to face it," she says. Her way was to laugh at it, sizing up the rest of the team. "And knowing the walruses were hungry and knowing they love blubber and thinking... sugar, I am going to be the target here."

Tired limbs

But the threat of an attack or a bite is remote. The real dangers were immediate and all about her: rogue waves, visibility and the negative pull of the water on tired limbs. Some of the stronger swimmers couldn't handle the slowness of their progress as the currents in the strait buffeted them and dragged them back.

And in the constant chopiness, getting back onto the dinghy after swims, when their limbs were not fully functioning, was hazardous. There were no engine guards so swimming up to the handlers at the rear of the boat was tricky. Sometimes they were just dragged out of the water by the backs of swimsuits, hauled from the water as if they themselves were sea creatures and lying there until the feeling began to return to their hand, their feet. It was never the cold she worried about. The body can endure more time in cold water than most of us understand.

"You could probably last a couple of

hours. It is the concept of getting the wallops from the waves. The cold won't kill you. What will kill you is the failure to be able to swim."

The cold shock passes after three minutes. If you can control your breathing, the rest is only pain. But what happens is your muscles get incredibly cold. And you can lose power. And that is why a lot of accidents and incidents can happen 50 metres offshore."

She doesn't think that those epic swims like the Bering Strait will happen on that scale again because the risk-assessment protocols have risen steeply even in the pe-

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riod since they emerged from the waters in Alaska, red skinned and euphoric and bearing their national flags. But she has further swims planned.

Before the pandemic struck, she had arranged to travel to base camp on Everest, climb to 5,000 metres and then swim a mile in a lake there. It's still on her long list but, for now, her swims are confined to the intensely local.

The nationwide embrace of open water swimming has delighted Moore. Last summer, the Kerry beaches were full in a way she hadn't seen since she was a child. She has watched small groups meeting regularly and swimming out knows it's the same

all over Ireland. A sort of unforced sea evangelism has taken place. A new generation has found the cold water and will swear by its healing properties of sea and body.

"I do think the benefits are enormous. But you need to be ready to get in the water. If you are cold going in because you haven't slept or eaten or are just exhausted, then that affects your swim. But yes, if you just go in for a dip for one to three minutes and control your breathing and enjoy that cold shock, well, you know, they say that sea swimmers have that alertness."

'Vampire facials'

"If you can imagine that rush of blood – I mean I have two big red rosy cheeks, I always have them. I used to take silly videos and tweet them to Kim Kardashian and Vogue Williams because they were going on about vampire facials. I told them if they come for a swim in Dingle they won't need vampire facials."

But it jumpstarts your heart and gets your lungs moving. It triggers proteins in your brain that have been linked to the reduction in the inflammation that contributes to dementia. But to go into the sea and swim you have to be the best version of yourself. You cannot hide. That is why I love the sea. When you get in there, you have to present."

So if you are swimming down around Dingle over the year, you'll probably see Nuala Moore. She's got the Kerry loquaciousness and will happily chat about her adventures when people call into her shop and ask her. But she's completely unassuming. In a way, what Nuala Moore is always talking about is the sea. For whether you swim across its unfathomable extremes as she has done or just take yourself slightly beyond the safety line of the crowd on the beach on a sunny day, the sea is a tremendous leveller.

"You are so small," she says as if this is the secret of the appeal. "You believe you have significance. But out there, you are nothing." And yet, it's where she always goes to find herself.



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Ballymurphy and the continuing search for a level playing field

Keith Duggan

May 29, 2021 • 18 min read 5



Pádraig Ó Muirigh was certain that his rugby days were finished on the morning that the Sunday World carried a front page story about the death threat. Beneath the headline was a close-up of his face framed by the sightlines of a gun. He was down in the clubhouse in St Gall's for a slow Sunday noontime pint when he saw the paper. It was disconcerting rather than upsetting. He imagined his family seeing it. And his friends. And then he thought of the rugby crowd at Cooke. He knew he would never be able to go back.

"I was sitting there feeling sorry for myself because of the rugby," he tells you from his office on a rare morning of calm, laughing gently at the memory.

Ó Muirigh came to rugby when his Gaelic football career was winding down, for pure escapism. The elsewhere-element of the game had always fascinated him when he was a kid watching the Five Nations, as it was then, with his granddad in the living room in Bombay Street.

Cooke rugby club was a bastion of old Belfast; Ormeau Road, founded 1910, first-team players lost in both World Wars. When Ó Muirigh was a teenager he'd never have dreamt of walking into a world like that. But by the age of 30, he was ready to try it. "Rugby was a middle class, Protestant game but in professional life, you get this confidence," he explains.

The club was predominantly Protestant and the culture steadfastly unionist. The first time he had ever had a constructive conversation with a Northern Ireland police officer was on his first day in the court room. The bailiff advised him to ask an arresting officer about his attitude to bail for a client. Ó Muirigh looked over to where the bailiff indicated and saw only the uniform, the aura.



Robert Troy: Ireland must seize AI opportunities as they spiral

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“I can’t speak to him,” he protested. The bailiff looked at him in bafflement. What? You can’t speak to him? “He’s a cop!” Ó Muirigh hissed. The older man looked hard at him and said: “And you want to be a lawyer?”

Now here he was, years later, playing Saturday rugby with police officers and army guys and committed unionists. Nothing glamorous but the game mattered to them. In fact, it was all that mattered.

“I’m a GAA mon,” he’d announced in broad west Belfast vowels on that first night when he turned up unannounced after Googling training times. Shaw’s Bridge – he had trained a few times there with the Antrim footballers. And they told him that was no problem. Maybe it helped that he was handy because of the Gaelic – good hands and he could kick a penalty. But there was never any acrimony. They’d made him captain before he even fully understood the rules.

“The ref would ask, scrum or penalty, captain? And I’d sort of say, what do yez think boys?” The night of the first club dinner he attended, they’d printed a fancy itinerary and he saw the ceremonials included a toast to the Queen. Ó Muirigh had an out-of-body experience, seeing himself holding aloft the champagne glass, to Her Majesty. Who was he? How could he do this?

Equally, who was he to object to something that had probably gone on for a hundred years?

Quietly, he took the president aside and said that when the toast took place, he would nip outside the room. He told one or two of the team of his plan, out of manners. A minute or two before the toast was held, Ó Muirigh made a subtle exit to the adjoining balcony. A few seconds later one of his teammates appeared. Then another. Before the toast had started, more of the team stood with him on the balcony than in the room. “I didn’t ask for that or expect it. But they just said: we shouldn’t be doing this stuff. If we want to make people comfortable, we don’t need it. And the next year, they quietly dropped it.”

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The rugby boys never asked him too many questions. They knew he was a solicitor. And when your name is Pádraig or Paddy, you don’t need to explain your background. But here was his life story, on all the news stands in the city. Death threat to Belfast solicitor representing loyalist families in a

UVF/UDA feud.

The youngest son of Seán ‘Spike’ Murray, senior IRA strategist and former Long Kesh prisoner. Close relative of Dan McCann, one of the three republicans killed in Gibraltar in 1988. It was all out there. He accepted that he couldn’t go back to the club. Why would they want him?

MICHAEL MANSFIELD QC WORKED ON BEHALF OF THE BALLYMURPHY FAMILIES AT THE INQUEST. PHOTOGRAPH: MATTHEW LLOYD/GETTY IMAGES

— WITNESS STAND —

When General Sir Mike Jackson took the stand at the Ballymurphy inquest, he declined the anonymity of screening. It’s a day that will always stand out for Ó Muirigh in the decade-long laborious quest to establish the innocence of those shot dead. Jackson walked in to the court room through a side door rather than the normal entrance which leads one past the area where the families sit. Ó Muirigh had immersed himself in Jackson’s life, poring over his biography, military books and every article he could find. He prepared a

file for Michael Mansfield QC, the crusading human rights barrister whom he had persuaded to work on the case.

“I had said to him I wanted him to take Jackson. And Michael was so relaxed that morning that I wondered for a second if he had actually read this file. When Jackson took the stand, you could sense the deference in the court room. You know, General Jackson is probably the most well-known British Army figure since the second World War. And Michael Mansfield did this thing where he stood up and turned to the families so he was facing them when he was speaking and not Jackson. The body language of that just amazed me. He made it clear that he was there to ask questions and not go softly. And my fears about his preparation quickly . . . evaporated.

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“Unknown to me, Michael had got into court early that day. And he had placed Jackson’s biography in the witness stand as a prop he could use. So he asked opening questions – would you say the paratroopers went in hot and heavy or were aggressive? And he said, okay you’ll find a book in the stand.

And you could see Jackson's face and he sort of knew he was got. And Mansfield asked him to read from it. So all of these things he wasn't sure about in the court he had said in the book. He was rattled. You could see the veins in his neck.

GENERAL SIR MIKE JACKSON WAS CROSS-EXAMINED AT THE BALLYMURPHY INQUIRY.
PHOTOGRAPH: STEFAN ROUSSEAU/REUTERS

“And, for me, moments like that were very important for the Ballymurphy families. Because this was a level playing field, in a court of law. After years of feeling downtrodden. And you had Michael Mansfield, who himself comes from a military background . . . you have this man in a posh English voice delivering the way that he had for them. And it felt: yeah, we can hold people to account in a court of law. You are held accountable. You have to deal with the facts.”

—— ‘WHILE HE’S IN JAIL, I AM YOUR DA’ ——

You could say that Pádraig Ó Muirigh's journey to that court room began

long before he was born. His grandmother, Mary Fegan, was from Ballymurphy. She was a friend of Joan Connolly, one of 10 people shot dead by the paratroopers over the three numbing August days in 1971 that have travelled through the decades. An 11th person, Paddy McCarthy, a local community worker from England, also died after suffering a heart attack on the street when confronted by soldiers who allegedly performed a mock execution. He heard the stories as a child. But in Belfast, in the North, there were so many other stories that Ballymurphy became obscured for years.

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Ó Muirigh was born in 1977; one of the generation of Belfast kids born into a city locked into an already hopelessly byzantine pattern of sectarian violence. His grandparents Molly and Paddy Murray lived on Kashmir Road, adjoining Bombay Street that was burnt in 1969. His father, hyper bright, was the first of the family to attend college: Queen's.

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“But that didn’t last long because he got involved in the conflict and got arrested. My grandmother often talks about the lecturers coming to the house to plead with her to keep him in college.”

A JULY 1970 PHOTOGRAPH OF A BRITISH ARMY INSTALLATION IN THE GROUNDS OF A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE BALLYMURPHY AREA OF BELFAST. PHOTOGRAPH: WESLEY/KEYSTONE/GETTY IMAGES

For six years Pádraig and his brother Seán visited their father in Long Kesh. In those times, Dan McCann, his father’s cousin, was the stand-in patriarch in the house. The boys spent a lot of time with their grandparents when their mother was working. Then, one day in March of 1988, Dan McCann’s name and photograph was all over the news: one of three Republicans killed in Gibraltar by the SAS.

“I had just turned 11,” Ó Muirigh says.

“And believe it or not, I was shocked he was in the IRA. Now, when I thought back it was quite obvious. For instance, we used to play football in Clonard monastery car park. If you know the geography you come down Clonard gardens from my grandmother’s to the butchers and as he came to the monastery he would come inside the wall. And obviously he was doing that to avoid being seen. I pieced all this together afterwards. My older brother was 10 months older than me and was a bit of an imp. And he once said to Dan: “You’re not my Da. And Dan said: ‘while he’s in jail, I am your Da’. He was just an uncle to us. But yeah that was a big moment in my life.”

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By then, his father had been released. The boys pleaded with their parents to be allowed to go to the funerals in Milltown. At first, they were given a flat no. At the last minute, their parents relented. So they were at Milltown cemetery when a loyalist paramilitary, Michael Stone, attacked the mourners, killing three people and injuring over 60.

“There was an eerie silence that day. No police around. And I do remember

adults saying, ‘there’s something not right’. ‘It doesn’t feel right’. There is a picture of my father carrying Dan’s coffin and Michael Stone is right next to it on the path. So unknown to us he was within a few feet of us at a few different times. And they were putting the other coffins down when the explosions went off. My father ran in the direction of it.”

They lost him in the confusion. By bleak coincidence one of the victims was named John Murray. Word got back to the house that their father had been killed so for a short while they feared the worst. Then, a few days later came the barbaric reprisal killings of two British corporals who had accidentally driven into the funeral procession of the Milltown victims.

“What happened then with the corporals . . . that was probably the worst time. Those few weeks felt different. It felt like the place was on the brink of something.”

TEAM MANAGER PÁDRAIG Ó MUIRIGH WITH THE ST GALL'S UNDER-10 FOOTBALLERS [CURRENT UNDER-15 TEAM) AT HALF-TIME DURING THE ANNUAL MAYDAY TOURNAMENT AT DE LA SALLE PARK IN BELFAST IN 2017. PHOTOGRAPH: MARK MARLOW

— PURE ST GALL'S —

That's a flavour of his childhood in Belfast. The city centre was out of bounds except for an occasional shopping trip. It would be wrong to say there was no fun or mischief. Just: it was a strange lens through which to view the world. He can't remember ever speaking to a Protestant except the taunts thrown over the peace wall from outside his grandparents' house on Bombay Street.

“But that was about curiosity more than anything else. Like where I grew up in Clonard there was nothing: no amenities. No parks or playgrounds. And there was one public phone box. So what we'd do is free-phone the police so you could throw stones when they'd come. But that wasn't done out of hatred. It was for a bit of crack: for a chase.”

To keep them off the streets, Ó Muirigh and his friends were sent to play Gaelic games. His mother's uncle, Jim Phelan, had hurled for Antrim. His grandfather was pure St Gall's. He found himself on a mini-bus headed for football training. And through it all, something his grandmother had said lodged in his mind.

Molly Murray had a thing about the law and lawyers. All of those days visiting her son and attending court, of travelling to Long Kesh had made her realise something. These dull court rooms and legal offices was where progress and consequence happened. The lawyers had been good to her, asking after the family, offering her lifts to save her taking the bus. A lawyer seemed like a thing to become. She would sew little seeds to her grandson. ‘You should be a lawyer. Do law. You can help your community.’ It was nothing heavy. Just an idea.

“I was seven. I didn't even really know what it meant.” But it stuck and years later after Ó Muirigh left school and was working and had started a family with Pauline, he decided to enrol in Open University, studying law at night

and sitting the Institute exams at the end. He gathered experience with other firms before setting up his own practice on the Springfield Road.

The Ballymurphy families started their campaign for justice in 1998. It was 10 years later when Ó Muirigh began to represent them. “The campaign was calling for a public enquiry, which I felt wasn’t achievable because it was at the whim of the British Secretary of State. I felt the inquest route was the way to go. But even that was pie in the sky.”

THE 10 GUNSHOT VICTIMS OF THE BALLYMURPHY MASSACRE IN WEST BELFAST IN 1971 (FROM TOP LEFT): JOSEPH CORR, DANNY TEGGART, EDDIE DOHERTY, FATHER HUGH MULLAN, FRANK QUINN, PADDY MCCARTHY, (LEFT TO RIGHT, BOTTOM ROW) JOAN CONNOLLY, JOHN MCKERR, NOEL PHILIPS, JOHN LAVERTY AND JOSEPH MURPHY. PHOTOGRAPH: BALLYMURPHY MASSACRE COMMITTEE/PA WIRE

— ‘ONE LESS MOUTH TO FEED’ —

They became akin to cold case investigators: studying old inquest papers, acquiring ballistics experts, mapping out the topography of the Ballymurphy estate as it had been that summer and, most of all, knocking on doors to gather, for the first time, eye-witness accounts of what people had seen. For

Ó Muirigh the big task lay in convincing the families that the justice system had changed. This event had defined their lives. His office was like a drop-in centre: these were clients but family friends also. The kettle worked overtime. Five separate inquests had been held in 1972, a strategy, Ó Muirigh feels, designed to fragment the killings and present the illusion of unassociated events. At one of those original inquests, Bella Teggart, a mother of 13 children, whose husband Daniel was killed at Ballymurphy was told by the judge that now, she had “one less mouth to feed”.

“You are better off,” he informed her.

Ó Muirigh can't pretend he was shocked by what they discovered over the past decade.

“Well, the extent of the cover-up was quite damning. Was I surprised that the paratroopers could shoot innocent people and get away with it? I wasn't. I have to be honest. I just felt my job was to try and prove that. What was different in this case was that you had a mother of eight, Joan Connolly, who was out looking for her daughter. You had the local priest shot dead. This was the big difference.

“What I wanted to try and do was understand how to young soldiers coming from working-class areas in Scotland, in Wales and England come into Belfast . . . and they don't have horns on their heads, you know? You have to work out why they would point a gun at a priest or a young mother from the community – who they knew, by the way. And feel it was okay to do that. It came out in the inquest. And what I found and where the evidence took me was to the demonisation and vilification of that community. What people don't realise is that you had dozens of others shot, including children. You had probably hundreds who were brutalised – their houses ransacked, beaten in the street, interned. So the physical violence was obvious. The other part of that triangle is structural violence.”

The coroner's verdict from the inquest, announced on May 11th, established the innocence of the victims and found that their deaths without justification. The initial relief of the families was tempered by the qualified apology offered by prime minister Boris Johnson. As a news story, Ballymurphy will fade. For Ó Muirigh the work goes on.

“In parallel with the inquest we had initiated civil proceedings against the Department of Defence. The other matter is the matter of prosecutions. The reality is that 50 years on, that is difficult. But it shouldn't be in the purview of Boris Johnson and the Tory government to decide on that. It should be an independent prosecutor. There is an injustice if you don't allow the process to play itself out.”

PÁDRAIG Ó MUIRIGH PLAYED FOR THREE SEASONS AS A GOALKEEPER WITH ANTRIM.
PHOTOGRAPH: TOM HONAN/INPHO

— ROYAL KERRY BOOT —

Somehow, through the nights of studying and the struggle to establish

himself as a solicitor, Ó Muirigh persisted with sport. In Belfast's fiercely localised GAA community he had acquired the name of a sharp goalkeeper. PJ O'Hare had called him into the Antrim seniors when he was a teenager but he wasn't ready. Then, in 2002, Brian White phoned him just before the start of the league to invite him into the panel. Oh, and be ready to play on Sunday because Seán McGreevy might be sick and that they might need him for Kerry.

That was his debut. Kerry were GAA royalty in his mind. Watching Dublin-Kerry in 1984 with his grandfather was like an awakening. "My grandfather was the most pleasant man you could meet and the only time he shouted at me was when I wanted to support Kerry instead of Tyrone in 1986."

Now, in February 2002, he was in Austin Stack Park in Tralee, watching the gods in their baggy jerseys warming up: Ó Cinnéide, Ó Sé, Moynihan, Crowley. Mike Frank Russell, the forward with the accountant's haircut and a rock god's soul, was a kind of idol. It finished 0-14 to 0-7. Ó Muirigh kept a clean sheet. At one stage he dived on a ball even as Russell went to fly-kick it home and discovered the acute pain of a royal Kerry boot meeting his tailbone. "You're a brave lad," Russell assured him as they left the field. "My arse was in that much pain I had to stand on the coach for the seven hours back to Belfast. But I'll take a kick from Mike Frank."

He played three seasons with Antrim and over a decade with St Gall's, where he now coaches. He knows the potential for Gaelic games in Belfast is immense.

"There's been an acknowledgement that Belfast was neglected that it was seen as the poor cousin. Clubs lose so many players from the age of 16 to 18. Some of the best I ever played with never played a senior game. Like, the greatest kid I played with in Gall's ended up being knee-capped. For anti-social activities. And I know when we were going well in Gall's, it was always

club first. I don't think it's like that in Tyrone or Donegal.”

BRIEGE VOYLE, DAUGHTER OF JOAN CONNOLLY, AND JOHN TEGGART, SON OF DANIEL TEGGART, SIT TOGETHER AT SPRINGHILL COMMUNITY HOUSE TO WATCH NORTHERN IRELAND SECRETARY BRANDON LEWIS MAKE A STATEMENT ON BALLYMURPHY TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS. PHOTOGRAPH: BRIAN LAWLESS/PA WIRE

— HEAVY-DUTY WORK —

Law and sport aren't separate planets. Both involve people. The patterns are clear in his mind. Ó Muirigh is in his 40s now. The office hours are long and he often goes straight to the pitch to coach the under-15s. His legal life is always going to take him through intense cul de sacs of sorrow and violence. It can be heavy-duty work.

He has already spent years working on the 1975 death of Stephen Geddis, the 10-year-old who was the first and youngest person killed by a plastic bullet. You don't leave a story like this behind you in the office. Stephen was just weeks back home after a dream summer in South Dakota as part of summer programme. It was late August. His parents rarely allowed him out late but it

was a gorgeous summer evening so they gave him a few minutes after nine. A riot flared. Shots were fired. At the original inquest, the Geddises were told: Your son should not have been out after nine.

“I could see the weight his parents carried when they walked in here. But the experience now for families going through an inquest is a world apart. Under Mrs Justice Keegan, everything is family centred.”

That inquest verdict is expected in late summer – too late for Mr Geddis.

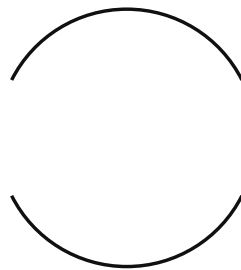
He presses on. He did go back to Cooke Rugby Club. His fears in the St Gall’s clubhouse that day were misplaced. Before he had finished reading the article, his phone rang. It was one of his rugby team-mates. Everyone had seen the article. They were horrified that his life had been threatened. And they wanted him to know that they were with him. They’d see him at training. It was a call that meant a lot.

Pádraig Ó Muirigh is too clear-eyed and mature to ever be anything but realistic. But if his city and if Northern Ireland is to integrate in future generations, then he knows that sport is a good place to find common ground. And he is passionate in his belief that the courtroom offers the best opportunity for understanding, for both Catholics and Protestants, as to what was happening during those furious 30 years.

Pádraig and Pauline’s son Daniel is a law graduate currently working in the family practice. Their daughter Maria has just completed her law degree. Ó Muirigh gets emails from kids from both communities aspiring to do the same. And an unexpected thing has started to happen since the Ballymurphy verdict was announced.

“I’ve had emails from the strangest places,” he says. From people on the Shankill Road and other unionist quarters of the city.

“Just saying: thanks. That they always thought that Ballymurphy victims story was just propaganda but now they can see what really happened. Because the courtroom is neutral. It is evidence based. So maybe it can have a healing role. Maybe there will be other cases where RUC widows are outside a court saying: I want people to understand my loss. And that people in my community can then say, yeah: that is the same hurt. You were let down like we are. People think that if you draw a line on the past, then you get reconciliation. No. You need to go back and tell the truth. We live in a small place. And there are going to be painful days. But I don't think we have an alternative.”



KEITH DUGGAN

Keith Duggan is a sports writer with The Irish Times

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MCDUB · 30 MAY 2021

A great read and hugely important that we get to hear these stories and from all sides. It will be then that people realise how those in power decide where battle lines are drawn and how they send the usually poor foot soldiers out to fight them. The powers that be even decide that it is not right for the soldiers to be prosecuted and they make it about the individual soldiers misdeeds, when in fact it is the "General Sir Mike Jacksons" of the world that should be prosecuted.

^ 2

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Thank you Keith Duggan for writing this very inspiring article and thank you Pádraig Ó Muirigh and your grandmother for inspiring you to make the journey you made.

^ 4

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