‘Miracle on the Shankill’: the Peace March and Rally of 28 August 1976

Grace Fraser and Valerie Morgan

When the two groups met at the junction of Northumberland Road and the Shankill Road, there was a tremendous gush as people came together and the march formed up. There was a great surge of people which shocked those watching. It was historic. History was being made. It was as if people were saying, ‘We do not want to be divided’. It was not a march against loyalism or republicanism. It was not against any particular group. It was a cry from the heart. It was a rally for peace, for people, for their families. It was a beautiful day.

Mairead Corrigan

Mairead Corrigan was one of the three founders of the Peace People, the movement begun in Northern Ireland in August 1976. This was her description of the defining moment at the beginning of the march on 28 August 1976, when the two main groups of participants, Catholics and Protestants, met, merged as one, and headed up the Shankill Road in the warm afternoon sunshine into the Protestant heartland of Belfast. The Marchers came from all over the city and beyond, including contingents from the Irish Republic. The majority were women, but there was a good sprinkling of men. People of all ages and circumstance took part, children in prams, youngsters holding their mothers’ hands, teenage girls arms linked together, housewives in summer dresses, old age pensioners, trade unionists, Catholic nuns and priests marching alongside Protestant clergy. The security forces, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the British Army, grouped discreetly but in sizable contingents in the little side streets off the Shankill, estimated the numbers attending to have been between 20,000 and 25,000. David McKittrick, then Northern Editor of the Irish Times, noted the
amazed comment of an elderly woman resident that ‘there must be 35 million of them’. Perhaps this was indeed how it must have seemed to the onlookers as the march ‘flowed’ up the Shankill towards Woodvale Park, growing in size as people eagerly joined in at every street corner.

But the sheer scale of the march was not the only thing to have made a lasting, arguably indelible, impression on both onlookers and participants. Indeed, the Shankill march was not the largest of that summer’s peace rallies: this took place in Dublin that same Saturday when 50 000 marched for peace. Although twenty years has erased much of the detail of the day, almost all of those interviewed could remember quite clearly how they had felt. Their abiding, undeniably wistful, memory is of a day charged with huge emotion, a day when, after seven years of savage communal conflict, Protestants and Catholics met face to face, stretched out the hand of friendship, hugged each other and wept tears of joy in the intensity of this strange encounter. Saidie Patterson, veteran trade unionist and former leader of Women Together, welcoming the marchers to her native Shankill, proudly told them, ‘This day is the crowning experience of my life.’ It was a euphoria born of universal relief, for, apart from one minor scuffle at the start on Northumberland Street, an interface between the Falls and the Shankill, the day had passed off peacefully. Patterson, initially opposed to the march – though not necessarily the rally – as too dangerous, had been of the opinion beforehand that it would require ‘something of a miracle on the Shankill to see us through’. Ciaran McKeown, also of the three original ‘Peace People’, had consistently argued that the march up the Shankill Road was a necessary ‘blooding’ of the peace movement and should go ahead despite the risk. As he watched the march edge its way inexorably upwards, he, too, had begun to share a general sense of relief: ‘By all that was mythologically holy, there should have been a riot, with people getting shot dead or beaten to death or worse. Yet here was one of the happiest sunlit expressions imaginable, of humanity in the mass.’

It had all begun just over two weeks before, on Tuesday, 10 August 1976. That day, Terry Carlin, ‘the young, hard-working secretary of the Irish Congress of Trades Unions’ (ICTU) and colleagues were attending a meeting at Stormont with Merlyn Rees, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Carlin vividly recalled what happened when suddenly Rees was passed a message: ‘He removed his glasses and bowed his head in his hands. I said, “Secretary of State, you have clearly received bad news. May I ask what it is?” He told us that reports were coming in of a shooting and car accident in West Belfast, on Finaghy