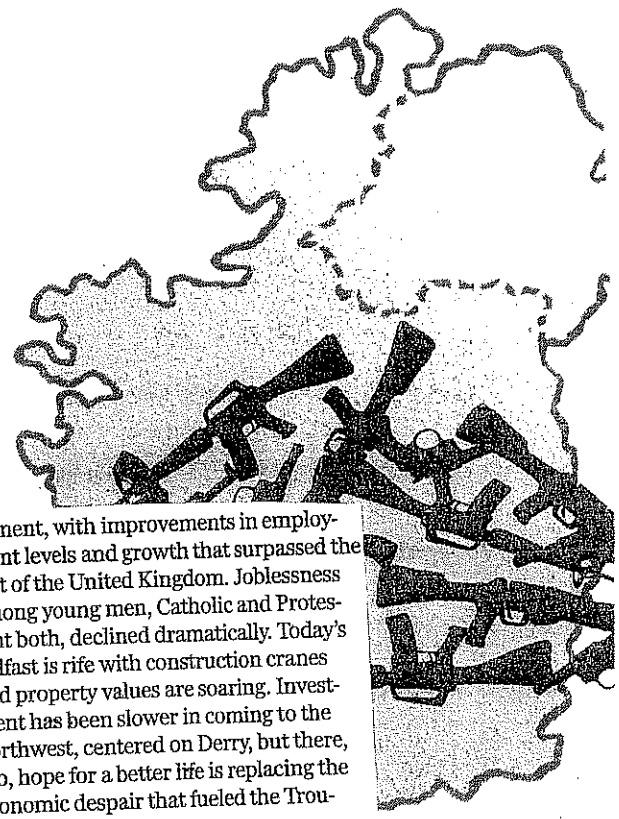
JAMES CARROLL

How peace arrived in Northern Ireland



"HAVE THE PATIENCE to work for a just and lasting peace," the American president said. "Reach for it and the United States will reach with you." Bill Clinton made that promise to Protestant and Catholic Irish people gathered in Derry's Guildhall Square late in 1995. Because the Irish found just that patience, their work for peace was rewarded two weeks ago when Protestant and Catholic parties jointly took responsibility for governing Northern Ireland. Most astoundingly, the power sharing is between two men who have spent their lives as sworn enemies. The firebrand Unionist bigot Ian Paisley is now first minister, and first deputy is former Irish Republican Army leader Martin McGuinness. That they jointly presided over the historic ceremonies at Stormont in Belfast is perhaps the most unpredicted turn in the ever-unpredictable Irish story.

The road to this peace has been twisted and long, stretching back through centuries of Irish resentment of British colonizers, Europe's longest-lasting wars of the Reformation, and deep hatreds bred of 20th-century violence that flared in 1916 and again in 1969. When 14 unarmed Irish Catholics were massacred in Derry by British soldiers in 1972, and when the soldiers were then exonerated by London, the contemporary conflagration was ignited. It was then that IRA recruitment took off in Ireland, IRA fund-raising took off in America (Noraid), and people on both sides began to treat the conflict as intractable. But it was not.

How was peace achieved in Northern Ireland? Among the most important elements were these:

Irish self-criticism. The hyper-nationalism of Catholics began to be criticized even by Catholics, including the writer Conor Cruise O'Brien, who identified the poisonous mix of redemptive suffering, ready violence, and the myths of 1916 as "the green fog." Garret Fitzgerald (the Republic of Ireland prime minister from 1982-1987) renounced the sacred Catholic ideal of a "free and united Ireland" with the simple recognition that Northern Ireland should never be forced into the republic against the will of its majority. The Catholic Northern Ireland leader John Hume was an unrelenting critic of Catholic violence.

A broader context. The narrow sectarian strife that wracked villages and urban neighborhoods changed when the Northern Irish world grew bigger, first through the coming of the European Union (Hume was elected to the European parliament in 1979); then when London and Dublin began to play constructive roles (the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985); and when Irish-Americans replaced support for the IRA with support for peace (Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy established the Congressional Friends of Ireland in 1981).

An involved US president. In 1994, Bill Clinton granted a visa to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, despite opposition from London and the State Department. Adams began turning the IRA itself away from violence. The high point of Clinton's 1995 visit to Northern Ireland was the day he began and ended with private meetings, first with Adams, then with Paisley. Each man felt understood by Clinton. At the White House, across subsequent years, Clinton transformed St. Patrick's Day from a celebration of green beer to a political time-out, the only place on earth where the ancient enemies would mingle freely. Clinton was key to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

Improved economics. When the economy of the Republic of Ireland took off in the 1990s, the entire island benefited. Northern Ireland went from being an economic backwater to a center of development, with improvements in employment levels and growth that surpassed the rest of the United Kingdom. Joblessness among young men, Catholic and Protestant both, declined dramatically. Today's Belfast is rife with construction cranes and property values are soaring. Investment has been slower in coming to the northwest, centered on Derry, but there, too, hope for a better life is replacing the economic despair that fueled the Troubles.

Peace is realism. The dream of peace, having transformed Europe and ended the Cold War nonviolently, has taken hold in Ireland. Some might say "even" in Ireland. Religious and class warfare had imprisoned the imaginations of both communities, but now the joined future is unfettered. The prospect of a pope-hating Ulsterman in partnership with a "hard man" of the IRA was beyond conceiving not long ago, yet it has come to pass. The Irish themselves have done this, but they could not have done it alone. The world is a different place, and, though one lately thinks of social and political change as mostly for the worse, Ireland shows the reverse to be true. A great, historic current is running toward peace. If only certain others would take note.

James Carroll's *column appears regularly in the Globe.*