

NIMMA News

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NIMMA seeks funding for new mixed marriage book

Children's stories to feature

NIMMA is seeking funding to produce a follow up paperback to its recent book 'Mixed Emotions'.

The new book, with the working title, 'A foot in both camps', is set to tell the stories of 10 children brought up in mixed marriages.

NIMMA Chair Ken Dunn said; "Mixed Emotions", which documented the mixed marriage experience in this country going back more than 70 years, caught the imagination of both the press and public and encouraged a lot of correspondence with our Belfast office.

"Much of that contact came from people who are the offspring of mixed marriages and at least two callers, who described themselves as the "exiled children" of such marriages, explained that their parents had been forced to leave Northern Ireland as result of their mixed relationships.

"We would hope to feature these stories of children abroad, as well as a number about children who grew up in the Province, to highlight the unique position that such children have had and continue to have in a divided society and to examine the impact of that society on ordinary people".

NIMMA is making application to the Big Lottery Fund for the money to produce the book.

Ken Dunn said; "The Fund came to our aid when we first mooted the idea for a mixed marriage book two years ago and we are hopeful that our planned sequel will receive the same level of financial support".

Groups targetted for NIMMA book

Dozens of community and religious groups throughout the island of Ireland have received copies of NIMMA's book 'Mixed Emotions' since its launch last spring.

NIMMA sees the book as a valuable educational tool and targeted such groups to maximise the book's impact on communities across the country.

Chairman Ken Dunn said; "The book is capable of stimulating debate and discussion about a subject that has been neglected for far too long and we have explained to our new audience that the book paints vivid pictures of changing clerical attitudes toward mixed marriage over a period of nearly 70 years, while featuring a comprehensive history of the subject on the island of Ireland and telling the real stories of ordinary people.

"NIMMA has achieved much since the dark days of the 1970s, but, as we all recognise only too well, there are many challenges ahead and we are determined to continue to address sectarianism in a post-conflict society.

"I hope that all our readers enjoy the book and that it is of use in their day-to-day work. If it is of particular interest, we will be happy to visit groups and talk with them further about the subject".



Newspaper columnist and lobbyist

Nick Garbutt tells his story as the child of a mixed marriage

Twice Orphaned

I've never met either of my parents and I don't know my father's name. She was a Catholic from over the border, he was a Protestant from Belfast and they chose to give me up for adoption in Manchester rather than to face the respective wrath of their families.

At home, I have a copy of my birth certificate. It states that my birth name was Cornelius Brennan, my mother was called Mary and the space for details about my father is blank.

When my adoptive mother first wheeled me around our estate in Manchester, a neighbour and someone she had considered as a friend, glanced down into the pram and said to her: "Be careful with that one, bad blood will out."

And I suppose I've been on a journey of understanding ever since, not to find my natural parents, but to understand more about the divided society of which I am a product. That's why I came to Belfast in the first place. More recently, I've been doing some research on the history of the Suffolk/ Lenadoon interface in West Belfast. I've spoken to members of both communities there, many of whom were forced out of their own homes in the most distressing circumstances imaginable.

The burnings and evictions in Belfast, which started in 1969 and went on for more than a decade, were the largest forced migration in Western Europe since the Second World War.

I have spoken to a woman from Suffolk whose earliest childhood memory is of glimpsing the red stair carpet in her former home as she was plucked out of her bed by a stranger in the night and bundled into a van to be driven away to stay with her grandma.

I've spoken to a man from Lenadoon who, as an eight year-old, watched his own MP lead a mob down his street, systematically setting fire to the houses as they went. And to a woman who still regularly passes the house she used to live in, which was bought and paid for by her own mother: where others live today.

The trauma of these experiences still resonates in working class communities across our city. These were the darkest days of division. Research published recently by Professor Mike Tomlinson of Queens University demonstrates the lasting legacy of the conflict in many parts of the city: we have issues around concerning levels of mental ill health, depression, self harm and suicide in areas most impacted by the conflict, areas which are also those with the highest levels of social deprivation

Before I came to Belfast, I worked in Liverpool where my earliest experience as a journalist was covering the Toxteth riots. I also had a spell working in Bradford in West Yorkshire, where at the time there were frequent street battles between the National Front and young men who had settled in the city from Pakistan.

Divided

Today there are parts of Oldham in Greater Manchester, and indeed other towns and cities in England where communities are physically divided, kids go to different schools, and there is no interaction. All that is missing are the peace walls. And it is the same in Berlin and in Paris and in many other cities in continental Europe. Strange isn't it that problems we thought unique to us are now manifesting themselves elsewhere?

And what happened in Suffolk and Lenadoon when the communities did get together was a realisation that members of the two communities actually had the same needs, battled with the same problems and worried about the same things. The key is for people to start talking to each other, that's when the boundaries start to break down, the rumours and the misunderstandings dissolve and when communities work together to resolve common problems. One of the troubling aspects of the emergence of division in England was that an approach was developed which effectively demonised host communities who had reservations, asked questions or in any way expressed concern about others moving into their locality. They were simply branded as racist.

Twice Orphaned...

The reality of course is that those concerns and tensions revolve primarily around jobs and housing, and again, given our history, this should not be surprising as these were and remain key communal issues here.

I feel very strongly about this because from my own experience working class communities are welcoming, warm and generous. I do not understand why it has become fashionable to sneer at people from a so-called ordinary background – I suspect this is an import from the United States of America where your wealth seems to be an index of your worth.

It was interesting and very significant to notice that in the Equality Commission's latest attitude survey it is middle class middle aged so-called well educated men who have the most propensity to openly express views that most of us would find sectarian or racist.

Privileged

And here we come to the nub of it. In a society where the gap between rich and poor is widening by the day, as wide today as it was in mid-Victorian times, and when social mobility has become as difficult as it was in the 1920s and when, even in our own city people in, for example the Malone Road area can expect to live as much as 15 years longer than those from less privileged areas is it any surprise that people in working class areas feel concerned and anxious about their futures?

When I first came to Belfast in 1990, there were three things that struck me about life here. The fact that everyone who worked in Belfast disappeared into their own communities as soon as work finished, and that after 5.30 the streets were dead. The other was being searched going into shops. In Liverpool, we were always searched on the way out! And the third was the almost total lack of anyone from any other community save the Orange and the Green.

On my first evening in the city I went for a drink with a friend I had met in Liverpool. We were walking to a bar when we passed Sandy Row- I asked him what it was like down there, and he replied: 'I've no idea and I've no intention of finding out.' It seemed to me then that Belfast was not one but two cities, and between those two communities the interaction was as close to zero as it was possible to be.

My view is that we can and should draw on our past, and how we welcome and integrate our new citizens is a great opportunity for the city. There is a way of showing that those who used to brand everyone here as barbarians and who are now experiencing at first hand segregated communities, communal disengagement and potentially starting on the path we once trod, can learn from our painful lessons. We've lived through division, we know about separated and alienated communities, the anguish of sectarianism and the



Children from Belfast's Suffolk and Lenadoon estates enjoy a cross community arts event

remorseless logic of the escalating violence that that can lead to and we are starting to learn how to bring people together. Belfast is a special, if not unique place, because conflicts are so rarely resolved. Issues remain but progress, by any international measure has been remarkable.

If we should have learned anything from what we've been through, it is about bringing people together, learning from each other, enjoying diversity and the energy new communities bring to our city, and understanding, that at the heart of all this, our problems are the same.

Sneer

And, further and beyond this, what would contribute most to community cohesion, between our two traditional communities and all our more recent residents, is to ensure that every citizen in Northern Ireland has the opportunity to develop and grow and to live their dreams. Communal discord is exacerbated when there is a lack of fairness, a failure to invest and engage in areas that need it the most, when health inequalities and the lack of social mobility are not addressed and when the gap between rich and poor is allowed to widen. Those who sneer and try to make an under-class out of suffering elements in society are more often than not those most responsible for creating the conditions where conflict can rear its ugly head.

Both my adoptive parents are now dead. I feel therefore twice orphaned, by those who brought me up and by those who chose not to because of the pressures they felt from their churches and their families and division. I know that my own experience is nothing to what so many people in Belfast have been through. I just happen to believe that it is important to learn from it and to ensure that future generations never have to suffer the pain of rejection, of alienation, the feeling of somehow not belonging, that everyone inevitably feels when decisions are made about them that are not based on their merit, but on who they are and where they are from.



MEMBERSHIP

**Interested in joining or rejoining NIMMA?
Simply ring us on Belfast
90 235 444 or e-mail
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Comment

From the Chair



Summer, sectarianism and a sequel

Summer seems to have flown without ever landing locally for more than a day or two, but the months of June July, August – what we used to call summer in the old days before the satellites got hold of the weather - remain the most popular for marriages of all descriptions.

As usual, NIMMA had its fair share of enquiries about marriages and baptisms throughout the period, playing our part, we trust, to provide the information and support that all couples need and appreciate.

We have also been busy preparing a grant application to the Big Lottery Fund to produce a sequel to our successful paperback 'Mixed Emotions'. Our new book aims to tell the stories of the children of mixed marriages, including some whose parents were forced to leave Northern Ireland as a result of breaking with tradition.

We are still hoping that our first book will be included in lessons for secondary school pupils here and look forward to a time when both books are required reading for local schools.

Sectarianism remains the bugbear of our

society and summer seems to bring out all that is worst in our towns and cities, but there are very many good people out there working for the day when a truly shared future becomes a reality.

Progress is indisputably slow and it is frustrating that commonsense does not prevail to prevent civil disturbance and the perpetuation of sectarianism. Nevertheless, nothing worthwhile ever gets done without a lot of hard work and, thank goodness, the worthwhile efforts of many decent folk will outweigh the depredation of the highly publicised few. We learned this month that our core funding has been confirmed by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin, albeit with a 25 per cent reduction. We are grateful to the Tanaiste, Mr Eamon Gilmore, and value greatly his appreciation for "the services that you provide and to wish you continued success".

We will have to tighten our belts in the months ahead and seek funding from wherever possible to help maintain our high standards of service, but the challenge is there to be met and we haven't shirked one yet.

Ken

Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

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**Office Hours Mon-Friday
9.30 - 12.30
(Evening appointments)**



Lagan Lovers

Thomas Watters, the child of a mixed marriage in the 1940s, remembers his mother and father.....

They were both born and lived near the Lagan Canal, not far from each other. Ella and Eddie got to know each other better in the winding department in the local linen mill. She worked there as a winder, he as an oiler, typical jobs for people with little or no qualifications. She was a little older than him, but age was not a factor. Religion was the problem, they “kicked with a different fut”! She was Protestant, he Roman Catholic.

Despite both having little or no interest in religion, when it became known they were courting, she felt so uncomfortable at home that Eddie found her a room to lodge in until they were married in the Sacristy of St Mary’s chapel Belfast (not at the altar) around 1940 after Ella took instruction in the Roman Catholic Faith as preparation for a Catholic marriage. Her mother found out about her daughter’s marriage from the milkman doing his rounds the next day. He said “Missus, I heard your daughter got married yesterday”.

Eventually they got a house to rent not too far from his work and both families. They settled down as best they could, despite being reminded almost daily by family and neighbours what they had done. A particular neighbour on Saturday nights returning from his weekly binge at the pub occasionally, when passing, shouted how she had blackened her soul by “turning her coat and marrying a ‘Fenian’.

Naturally children were conceived and unfortunately the first born died at birth. Two more healthy boys saw the light of day in 1944 and 1947. The first they named Thomas, the second Eamon. Her mother once remarked, “I suppose you will name the next one after the Pope”! Then in 1949 another unborn child died in Ella’s womb, remained unnoticed as there were little or no pre birth examinations then. The result, the womb turned cancerous and led to her death in August 1949. She was 38 years old and left behind two boys aged 5 and 2 years.

Ella was interred in the Holy Trinity graveyard and on the day of the funeral. I, the oldest boy (then aged 5) did not understand what was happening, accompanied my maternal Grandmother to the cemetery gates and saw a coffin being carried through them. When my Grandmother wept into her handkerchief, I heard a lady standing nearby say to her neighbour “God help that wee lad there, that’s his mother”!



Ella and Eddie Watters

Both Grandmothers wanted to take control of the boys and to rear them in what each thought was the correct religion. Eddie decided that his mother should rear the two boys until he was able to look after them and they were brought up in the Catholic faith, although they were often reminded by family and neighbours that they were the product of a mixed marriage. Eddie never remarried.

Eddie with the assistance of his family reared the two boys, was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1965 and died on 15th July 1966, aged 49. He was buried beside his wife. Shortly before he died, he remarked, “Sometimes I wonder if God really exists. All my life I struggled and did without, now when the boys are grown up and independent and I can have a little enjoyment out of life this happens to me”!