



# SEEDS AND SAPPLINGS:

The path to the Good Friday Agreement

---



by Fergus Finlay



In Seamus Heaney's poem "Digging" – whose opening lines compare the grip of a pen to the snugness of a gun in his hand – he describes his father at work.

*"The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked ..."*

On the day they signed the Good Friday Agreement, Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair capped a towering political achievement, and cemented a place in the history of this island. In gathering so many political opponents and steadfast enemies around the same table, they achieved something never done before. And they created a peace that has so far proved durable, despite endless challenges and continuing division.

They would have known that day that they were working in a field where many had worked before. Faithfully and diligently. Tending, planting, pruning, nurturing. And often in the shadow of a gun.

The road to the Good Friday Agreement is marked by many milestones. More than 3,500 graves are on that road, including the graves of nearly a hundred children. Thousands more people still carry deep emotional and physical scars.

There are dozens, maybe hundreds, of place names synonymous with pain and suffering and atrocity. Greysteel; Warrington; Brighton; Birmingham; Omagh; McGurk's Bar in Belfast; Frizell's Chip shop on the Shankill Road; Talbot Street, Parnell Street and Lincoln Place in Dublin; Bloody Sunday in Derry – these are just a few of the many places etched in the undying memories of the conflict.

There are other milestones – saplings planted along the way that reached their full maturity in the Good Friday Agreement. None planted without difficulty, but all part of the same overarching commitment to finding a better way.

The great Irish diplomat Noel Dorr concludes his magisterial book on the Sunningdale Agreement by describing the Agreement as the path not taken – "one of the what-ifs of Irish history". But that Agreement, conceived in the aftermath of three years of intense violence and brought down by yet more violence, nevertheless planted seeds that were to be nurtured for many years.

As with every subsequent Agreement, the process involved a seemingly endless sequence of behind-the-scenes meetings, involving great public servants on both sides of the Irish Sea. The drafting and endless redrafting of language involved extraordinary skill and patience, and was to be repeated many times throughout the 1980s and 90s.

It would be impossible to list the diplomats, public servants, political advisers and others who over the years played painstaking roles in the development of a set of words, and just as importantly,

relationships, ultimately capable of bringing people together. Each and every one of them made a significant contribution to peace.

And Sunningdale involved no little political courage and a willingness to take risks on both sides. On all sides, actually – people like Gerry Fitt, Brian Faulkner, and many others put aside personal feelings then to seek a democratic and political path to progress.

It was that political courage that planted the seeds. In the Sunningdale communique the then Irish Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, declared on behalf of the Irish people that “the only unity they wanted to see was a unity established by consent”. British Prime Minister Ted Heath said that if in the future the people of Northern Ireland should indicate a wish to become part of a united Ireland, “the British Government would support that wish”.

A Council of Ireland was proposed in the Sunningdale communique (though never, of course, implemented). It was to give equal weight to political leadership north and south of the border, and it was to be assigned tasks reflecting the common interests of everyone who lived on the island.

The principle of consent given expression in Sunningdale, and the recognition of an Irish dimension to a situation previously rigidly seen as an internal British matter, were to become seedbeds of the entire process.

Garret FitzGerald and Margaret Thatcher built on that progress in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. Although it was widely believed that FitzGerald had been humiliated by Thatcher’s famous “out, out, out” speech after publication of the New Ireland Forum, his persistence succeeded in placing British-Irish relations on an entirely new footing. The establishment of a secretariat in Maryfield, on the outskirts of Belfast, enabled the process to put down deeper roots.

The next essential stage in the process involved the ending of violence. A strategic shift, brought about in some secrecy by Charles Haughey in the late 1980s, prepared the ground by making the process more inclusive. Those involved in violence, who had always been seen as being on the margins, were now seen as holding the key to peace. What became known as the Hume-Adams process was the visible manifestation of the willingness of paramilitaries to compromise at last.

Albert Reynolds and John Major took the fateful next steps. Reynolds had one simple, and overriding, objective – get rid of the guns. After many more months of intense negotiating and drafting, and with immense help from President Bill Clinton, he and Major signed the Downing Street Declaration.

It involved enormous risk on both sides, because both men would have been accused of duplicity if the Declaration, which further strengthened the principle of consent, had not worked. But the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness ensured that, little by little, there could be no going back. At the end of August in 1994, the IRA declared a ceasefire.

Other leaders took risks too. Loyalist leaders like Gusty Spence and David Ervine ensured that a loyalist ceasefire – and apology – followed the IRA ceasefire within weeks.

Building on the IRA ceasefire – and eventually, rebuilding it when it broke down – involved immensely complicated further development. Dick Spring and Patrick Mayhew virtually single-handedly negotiated the Joint Framework Documents published in the spring of 1995. That set of documents, agreed to by John Major when he was in a deeply parlous situation in the House of Commons, contained among other things the design of the Assembly that sits today in Northern Ireland.

And when the question of decommissioning weapons became a further stumbling block, John Bruton proposed, and John Major accepted, the establishment of an international body to seek to manage that thorny issue. It was that proposal by the Taoiseach that introduced George Mitchell to the process. His wise counsel and infinite patience were to become central to the Good Friday Agreement.

On the day they signed the Agreement, neither Tony Blair nor Bertie Ahern could have known that two men in particular were to become critical to the process. Through their emerging friendship and mutual support, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness were to become in a unique way the personification of the transformation peace demanded.

One person above all however personifies not a transformation, but the constancy that made peace possible. He was at Sunningdale in 1973, and he was present when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. In the quarter of a century between those two events John Hume never wavered in his commitment to peace and to a democratic solution. And he will be forever remembered, alongside his great colleague Seamus Mallon, as the architect of peace.

Both Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair will be remembered for their work, skill and determination in bringing the Good Friday negotiations to a successful conclusion and for signing the Good Friday Agreement. They will both know themselves that the achievement of peace involves an immense debt to others. As we owe an immense debt to them.

---

*Fergus Finlay served as advisor to then-Tanáiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dick Spring, from 1994-1997. He is a weekly columnist with the Irish Examiner and previously served as CEO of Barnados.*

The Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) is Ireland's leading international affairs think tank. Founded in 1991, its mission is to share ideas and shape political, policy and public discourse in order to broaden awareness of international and European issues in Ireland and contribute to more informed strategic decisions by political, business and civil society leaders. The IIEA is independent of government and all political parties and is a not-for profit organisation with charitable status.

In January 2020, the Global Go To Think Tank Index ranked the IIEA as Ireland's top think tank.

© Institute of International and European Affairs, May 2021

Creative Commons License

This is a human-readable summary of (and not a substitute for) the license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike/4.0/> 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

You are free to:

- Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt - remix, transform, and build upon the material
- The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

**Attribution** — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

**NonCommercial** — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

**ShareAlike** — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

**No additional restrictions** — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union



**The Institute of International and European Affairs,**

8 North Great Georges Street, Dublin 1, Ireland

T: +353-1-8746756 F: +353-1-8786880

E: [reception@iiea.com](mailto:reception@iiea.com) W: [www.iiea.com](http://www.iiea.com)