



Don Mullan remembers a man of peace...

## John Hume, 1937 – 2020

“Our humanity transcends  
our identity.”

The funeral cortège of Martin McGuinness had left ten minutes earlier from the grounds of the Long Tower Chapel, overlooking Derry’s Brandywell and Bogside, across the valley from the Hill of Creggan. A lone figure walked slowly from the front of the chapel and stood in quiet reverence before a life size statue depicting Christ in the tomb. A hush fell upon those observing, for the lone figure was John Hume. In his old age John looked wearied and one wondered what thoughts might be passing through his once brilliant and strategic mind.

Beyond the broken and exhausted body of Christ John would have seen a statue of Derry’s founder, St Colmcille, standing before a calvary scene, glancing over his right shoulder, with outstretched arm and pointing index finger, exhorting the faithful to remember



Don Mullan and John Hume address the media following a meeting with British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Patrick Mayhew, in 1997.

the supreme sacrifice we recall at Mass. I thought of the words uttered by the Anglican clergyman, John Newton, composer of *Amazing Grace*, near the end of his life: “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things; that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour.”

There was poignancy in the scene I was witness to. Here stood a man who, in the words of former president Mary McAleese, was a colossus who had achieved the stature of Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847) and who had, in fact, “completed the work of O’Connell.”

It was impossible to look at our now spent and confused Civil Rights leader without feeling the weight of sadness. John was, first and foremost, a community leader who had lead us in countless civil rights marches, who stood defiant before the police and army, who had been water cannoned and arrested, who had comforted the afflicted, and who took our cause to London, Brussels, Strasbourg and Washington, without ever succumbing to the temptation of violence. A leader who had won the Nobel, Gandhi and MLK Peace Prizes.

John was, first and foremost, a community leader who had lead us in countless civil rights marches, who stood defiant before the police and army, who had been water cannoned and arrested, who had comforted the afflicted, and who took our cause to London, Brussels, Strasbourg and Washington, without ever succumbing to the temptation of violence.



The late John Hume MP, Nobel Laureate, reflects before the statue of Christ in the Tomb at Long Tower Church, Derry, on the day of the funeral of Martin McGuinness, March 23rd, 2017. Below: Christ in Tomb, Long Tower, taken on the day of John Hume's funeral, August 5th, 2020. It is the view from where John stood at the funeral of Martin McGuinness. In the background St Colmcille points to the supreme sacrifice.

(Photos: Don Mullan)

There was real pathos and tenderness in this moment of grace. As if John was reflecting on his own impending demise, yet unable to comprehend how his vision and hopes had endured, despite the many crosses he had to carry. The remains of Derry's Martin McGuinness had just left and the peacemaker he became was intimately linked to the political risks and dialogue John Hume had undertaken.

Perhaps the greatest poignancy and sadness lay in the fact that here was the man who had been the primary architect of the Good Friday Agreement, who had laid the foundation for its success, despite enormous opposition, by insisting on entering into a dialogue with the President of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams. Yet, as the fruits of his work began to take root and the saplings of peace began to grow and blossom, he was deprived of what would have been, undoubtedly, his greatest joy. The birth of new generations who would never again witness tragedies such as Bloody Sunday, the Dublin and Monaghan Bombings, the Kingsmill massacre, Greysteel or Omagh.

The onset of dementia often finds the sufferer returning to the memories of childhood and adolescence. The childhood and adolescence of John Hume was one where the Catholic Church greatly influenced the lives of the faithful who packed the churches across the island on Sundays, who attended weekly sodalities, prayed the Rosary, generously supported Irish missionary societies and found comfort in the sacraments. Such was its influence that John, himself, entered the seminary before becoming a teacher.

Dementia is a huge weight on the families who must live with it, especially the fear of the sufferer wandering off and becoming disoriented. Yet, from an early stage, the Hume family, especially John's wife, Pat, found great comfort in the care and sensitivity of their neighbours



and the wider Derry community. If John was seen to be wandering beyond the environs of the city, it was a regular occurrence for a friendly driver, especially taxi drivers, to stop and offer to bring him home.

John was often seen to wander into local churches and there in the quiet seclusion of their sanctuaries, to sit and be still. On one occasion, my sister, Deirdre, upon exiting the Bishop's House in the grounds of St Eugene's Cathedral, found John kneeling in the rain at the grotto to Our Lady of Lourdes. "John," she asked, "Do you want a lift home?" And home he went, much to Pat's delight.



**St Eugene's Cathedral, Derry** (Photo: A.F. Borchert, Flickr)

John spent his last years in Owen Mor nursing home on the outskirts of Derry. It was there on August 3rd 2020 he breathed his last. Derry people were acutely aware of John's failing health but still when the word of his passing came, a numbness spread, first upon the town, and then throughout Ireland and beyond.

Actor Gabriel Byrne upon hearing the news sent me a text message simply stating, "Sad hearts today Don. A truly great man." I responded, "Yes Gabriel. And his wife Pat was, in her own right, an equal colossus. She carried him across the decades with the most devoted loyalty and unwavering belief." He replied, "I'm so deeply saddened by his death. When a great one passes it's a special kind of grief. I can't really explain it but I'm sure you know what I mean."

I did know what Gabriel meant and a few lines of Maya Angelou's (American poet, and civil rights activist, 1928-2014) poem *When Great Trees Fall*, came to mind. It was inspired by the death of one of John's great heroes, Martin Luther King Jr.

*...And when great souls die,  
after a period peace blooms,  
slowly and always  
irregularly...*

Even in death, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, John was deprived of what would have been a funeral to equal that of O'Connell or Parnell. Yet the dignity and decency of the Hume family was evident, even in grief. Instead of crowds gathering at St Eugene's Cathedral to welcome his remains, they asked people to stay at

home and at 9pm light a candle and to pray with them the Peace Prayer of St Francis of Assisi.

The following day, a modest cortège departed after the Requiem Mass, John's body to be buried in a wicker coffin, a silent witness to his commitment to caring for the Earth – our common home. There was to be no special plot to mark him as a man of importance. Instead, he was buried in a simple grave, in chronological sequence, alongside the ordinary people of Derry for whom he had given his life and health. As he was lowered into the grave, his family and close friends spontaneously burst into song:

"We shall overcome... for deep in our hearts, we do believe, we shall overcome, one day!"

In defending his dialogue with Gerry Adams in 1993 he took the opportunity to call upon Unionist politicians to do exactly with Loyalist paramilitaries what he was doing – to engage in dialogue with them. And so "to bring the violence and killing to an end" because, he argued:

"Our humanity transcends our identity."

Those five words, surely, are the summation of John Hume's life.

*Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.* ■

Don Mullan is a former Kiltegan student, who was born in Derry. He is a concept developer who works extensively on justice, human rights and environmental campaigns.  
[www.donmullan.org](http://www.donmullan.org)