

# **Where are the people?**

Contemporary photographs of Belfast 2002 - 2010

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## The Light of Other Days

Ciaran Carson

It begins in a fog, the window of memory obscured. I imagine opening the door and walking over the empty threshold, footfalls echoing those that have gone before. I cannot remember if I have been here in another life. I must have walked past this shop-front many times over the years. I would have first set foot on the Lisburn Road when my father would take the family to watch the annual Twelfth of July parade on its way to the Orangemen's Field. Banner after banner billowing in the memory over fifty years ago, Orange music playing over, over, over.



When I lived on the Lisburn Road round some thirty years ago I'd sometimes take the train into town at Adelaide Halt, named for Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen, the consort of William IV and the aunt of Queen Victoria, who gave her name to Great Victoria Street Station, where I'd disembark. In 1971, when I lived in Andersonstown, I'd take the train on the same line from Balmoral Halt – named for Victoria's residence in Scotland – to Lisburn, where I'd meet my then girlfriend at Wallace Park, named for Sir Richard Wallace, absentee Member of Parliament for Lisburn from 1873 to 1875.



The Wallace Collection at Hertford House in London was established in 1897 from the private collection of Richard Seymour-Conway, 4th Marquess of Hertford, who left it to his illegitimate son Sir Richard Wallace, whose widow bequeathed it to the nation. In the Collection is a watercolour by Théodore Géricault of William IV as Prince of Wales on a white charger which reminds me of similar equestrian depictions of King William of Orange on Orange banners and on gable walls. The Géricault is a copy of an engraving by William Ward after a portrait, now untraced, by George Henry Harlow.



This is not Wallace Park in Lisburn but Drumglass Park on the Lisburn Road, though all public parks tend to look alike, copies of copies of an original grand English park. The land was bequeathed to the people of Belfast by Henry Musgrave of Drumglass House, who gave his name to the Musgrave Channel in Belfast Lough, where the *Titanic* was launched. Drumglass Park is more popularly known as Marlborough Park or Cranmore Park, from the two streets that border it. Drumglass, from the Irish *droim glas*, green ridge; Cranmore, from the Irish *crann mór*, great tree. As for Marlborough...



Marlborough is named for the Dukes of Marlborough, a branch of the Spencer family which includes the Earls Spencer and Lady Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales, who died in a car crash in the Pont d'Alma tunnel in Paris on 31st August, 1997. The Pont d'Alma is named for the battle of Alma during the Crimean War, in which the Franco-British alliance defeated the Russian army on 20th September, 1854. Alma Street in Belfast was near my former residence in Raglan Street, named for Lord Raglan, commander of the British forces in the Crimea. Alma Street and Raglan are no more.



I know I have crossed this threshold before several times some years back, though I cannot say exactly when nor how many times exactly. In any event when I passed it one day, I cannot remember which, I found the business closed. I cannot remember what took its place, if anything. But I remember sitting on some of these chairs wondering who had sat in them before. I remember looking into an antique mirror and wondering how many other faces had been reflected in it, whose they might have been. I remember thinking of the dead and how they lived.



On 19th June, 1690, the army of King William of Orange marched south from Belfast up the Malone Road on their way to the Boyne, where the battle commemorated by the Orangemen would occur on 12th July. The Lisburn Road had not yet been built, but would run parallel to their route. Folk memory has it that heavy showers forced the King to take shelter under a great tree in the grounds of Cranmore House, the residence of one John Eccles, and that Eccles subsequently changed its name to Orange Grove, but it later reverted to Cranmore, the Great Tree.



The Post Office reminds me that I used to work as a temporary postman during the Christmas holidays, and that one year my delivery route, or 'walk', took in the leafy suburban streets on the west side of the Lisburn Road, built on high ground that was once good farmland. The east side comprises streets of mean terraced houses built on low, boggy ground. The Lisburn Road is a class divide. Then my eye is caught by the adjoining shop, Diane Charles, and I think of Diana, Princess of Wales, and Charles, Prince of Wales. The word 'Wales' means 'foreigner'.



The window is a mirror. The Lisburn Road shops are mainly on the east, lower-class side, but cater to a higher class of clientele. The headless mannequins hang amid the trees of Drumglass Park on the other side. Even the charity shops are high-class. In Age Concern I bought a bespoke tweed hacking suit, made, according to the label, by Sullivan Woolley of Conduit Street, Savile Row, for a Major N. Livingstone and delivered to him on 26th October, 1969. It fits me like a glove. I wonder if he served in Northern Ireland and if he is now dead.



My girlfriend of 1971 took a flat in Adelaide Park. It was a hundred yards' walk to Adelaide Halt, and we would sometimes take the train to Lisburn to retrace or commemorate our previous footfalls in Wallace Park. She was Protestant, I Catholic. We came literally from both sides of the track, since the railway which runs closely parallel to the mainly Protestant Lisburn Road is a sectarian divide: beyond it lie the Bog Meadows and Catholic Andersonstown. At the corner of Adelaide Park was a police station which grew more heavily fortified over the years. It is still there.



Certain public parks, especially when the wind blows through the trees, remind me of the park in Antonioni's film *Blowup*, made in 1966, and which I saw around 1968. The title refers to a series of blowups of a series of photographs whose very rough grain seems to show, or not show, that a murder has been done in a park. The more they are examined, the more we watch the film, the less we seem to know. The location in question is Maryon Park in Charlton, London, which was formerly part of a wooded area known as Hanging Woods.



Some thirty years ago I lived in a flat on the Lisburn Road with my wife Deirdre, though she was not my wife then. Soon after we left for elsewhere, the Victorian terrace which contained the flat was demolished and replaced by the faux Victorian terrace whose dormer windows are visible in the top right corner of this photograph. Shops have been built on the area in front of the terrace, including a barber's – The Cut – and an Xtra-Vision. I peer at a dormer through a magnifying glass, trying to remember our former lives in rooms not there.



I am trying to place this gate but have no memory of it. I do not know where it is or what it leads to. I remember this, from 'Old Man' by Edward Thomas:

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray  
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;  
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait  
For what I should, yet never can, remember:  
No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush  
Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,  
Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;  
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.



Yesterday I walked a section of the Lisburn Road and saw this gate. The photograph is some six years old. The gate does not seem to have been painted since: much the same paint loss is visible on its lower edge, at ankle level, and I imagine it must be a stiff gate, needing to be kicked to make it give way. Still, I think of the gate and the faux limestone wall as being relatively new; that is, they were not there thirty years ago, as I remember it. Instead I see a wrought-iron gate, a privet hedge.



Deirdre and I married in 1982. We had our first child in April, 1986. We moved to the Antrim Road in North Belfast in March, 1987. We had our second child in October, 1987, our third in October 1990. For some years we would drive them to Drumglass Park on the other side of town. When I look at this photograph I remember them at various stages in their development, as if seeing the ghosts of what they were and what they would become, learning to walk, run, climb, ride bicycles. How time flies. We say, 'It seems like yesterday.'



Leases expire, retailers go out of business or move elsewhere. 'Retail' is from the Old French *retail*, a piece cut off, as in *tailleur*, to cut, as in English 'tailor'. The UPS sign in this photograph stands for Ulster Property Sales, and for many months Deirdre and I would peruse the windows of estate agents and pore over their brochures of houses for sale, picturing ourselves in them. We lived in many houses in our imagination before we made the final cut. Happily established where we are, we still think of what our lives would be had we moved elsewhere.



The main Belfast office of Her Majesty's Royal Mail used to be in Royal Avenue before it moved to Tomb Street, which is named not for a place of interment, but for a prominent Belfast family who constructed Donegall Quay in 1804. Donegall Quay is named for the Marquess of Donegall, a title granted to the Chichester family whose ancestor Arthur Chichester was granted the town of Belfast and its surrounding lands by a royal charter of Queen Elizabeth I. Tomb Street reminds me of 'dead letters', mail that cannot be delivered to the addressee or returned to the sender.



Our family moved to Andersonstown in the mid 1950s. It was a semi-rural location then, and behind our house were fields, and hedges where we children would build hidey-holes or huts in which we would retreat for hours from the outside world. The fields are long gone. In the early 1970s I began to read 9th century Irish poetry, much of it written in hermitages and extolling their virtues. 'I wish for a hidden little hut in the wilderness that it might be my dwelling,' writes one hermit poet, 'with a beautiful wood close by, filled with many-voiced birds.'



My mother and father would take us children for long walks at weekends, sometimes on the Lisburn Road. My mother admired the big houses and their gardens. We would wonder who lived there. Sometimes, admiring a flowering plant, she would steal a slip of it and plant it in our own little garden at the back of our semi-detached house. One such plant with large orange flowers took rather too well, and proved difficult to eradicate. We called it the Orange Lily. It is really a species of iris, the hybrid *montbretia*, of one of whose variants is called His Majesty.



The bunting and the flag are relics of the Twelfth of July parade, to which my father religiously took us every year. A pious Catholic, he was also catholic in his cultural tastes, and knew all the popular Orange songs. I hear him singing:

And it's heigh, heigh, ho, the Lily O,  
The royal, loyal Lily O!  
Beneath the sky, what flower can vie  
With Erin's Orange Lily, O!

And I hear him singing *Oft in the Stilly Night*:

Oft in the stilly night  
Ere slumber's chain has bound me,  
Fond memory brings the light  
Of other days around me.