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# IRELAND AND VICTIMS

CONFRONTING THE PAST, FORGING THE FUTURE

Foreword by Marianne Elliott



## Foreword

William Trevor's novel *The Story of Lucy Gault* is about a Protestant family in County Cork in the 1920s. It tells of rumours and fears of imminent attack causing the family to flee Ireland, with tragic consequences. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that no attack was imminent and the drastic over-reaction was unnecessary. In real life I have encountered similar stories, from the 1640s, 1790s, 1820s, 1840s, right up to 1969 and beyond. People becoming victims because of rumours that they might become such. Rumours were often based on real events in the past, but just as often based on fears that people will behave as agitators on their own side claim they will.

Addressing victims' issues is an essential part of post-conflict dialogue. But when that process develops into competing senses of victimhood it continues the conflict by other means. It also demeans those who really are victims. This wide-ranging collection of essays and the conference on which it is based has not confined itself to the northern conflict. Its strength lies in the recognition of the much wider and more difficult issue of victims and victimhood on the entire island.

Ireland has only in recent decades started to question the cult of victimhood at the heart of its national identity. Real or imagined suffering in the past gave a licence to national institutions and groups themselves to victimize, sure in the knowledge that they would not be publicly challenged. Likewise, in Northern Ireland communal history of past victimization allowed people to put the Troubles into context, to understand and often to explain away atrocities on their side and to devalue the sufferings of others. This is why competing stories of victimhood do not provide a sound basis for peacemaking.

But below the polemic, stories of real hurt and suffering need space and recognition, not only because natural justice and human fellow-feeling require it, but because their hurt in turn can feed the communal sense of suffering in the future. There will never be a peace process which will

adequately deal with the victims of conflict. No one can turn the clock back. But the political, communal and religious leaders helping to understand and represent them, and those trying to make sense of such trauma around the world, will find in this collection an impressive and imaginative range of ideas, discussion and analysis. Thank you, Rennes.

MARIANNE ELLIOTT