

Conlon, Sarah (née Maguire)

by Patrick Maume

Conlon, Sarah (née Maguire) (1926–2008), campaigner, was born 20 January 1926 in the Falls Road area of Belfast, the daughter of Vincent Maguire and Mary Catherine Maguire; she had three brothers and three sisters. Sarah's life was dominated by work, family and religion. On leaving school aged 14 she worked as a yarnspinner in Greeves's linen mills in Belfast, before moving to a scrapyards-cum-junkshop where she sorted old clothes for resale. In 1947 she married Guiseppe Patrick Conlon (1923–80), a labourer, also born in the Falls Road area. Of their children, a son, Gerard, and two younger daughters survived to adulthood; before Gerard's birth another child died of pneumonia aged two and Sarah suffered a stillbirth and a miscarriage. (These losses, and the strong Redemptorist influence on Belfast popular catholicism, suggest Gerard was called after the Redemptorist saint Gerard Majella, invoked by pregnant women for safe delivery.) Around 1970 Sarah became a catering assistant at the Royal Victoria Hospital, earning £28 a week in the early 1970s, where she remained until she retired aged 65. She also received assistance from her mother, who lived with the family and acted as credit agent for local moneylending shopkeepers; as a result, the family were relatively well off by the standards of their impoverished neighbourhood.

Guiseppe was called after a local Italian chip-shop owner who was a friend of the family and served as his godfather. He found his unusual name an embarrassment and tried to have himself addressed as 'Patrick'. (Some contemporary news coverage calls him Patrick or Patrick Joseph; 'Guiseppe' is the spelling used by Conlon and his family and friends; some sources use the more conventional 'Giuseppe'.) He received a primary education locally. In the early 1940s, while working on building sites in London, he was conscripted into the British army and assigned to the Royal Marines. He disliked the idea of killing and wished to stay close to his sweetheart Sarah, whom he had met when they were schoolchildren. When allowed home leave after completing basic training he decided not to return. He was arrested as a deserter and put on the ferry for Britain, but leapt overboard in Belfast Lough, swam ashore, and was not pursued further.

Guiseppe held various labouring jobs, including working on a road-surfacing gang, but in 1965 was diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to a sanatorium (as were his two daughters). His illness derived from a period in the 1950s when he worked at the Harland and Wolff shipyard applying red lead to hulls, and was refused a mask to protect him from fumes. After 1965 he was largely unable to work (though he earned a small amount by acting as 'marker' in a local bookmakers, writing the changing odds on a blackboard). Over time, he left his home less frequently; his only amusements were visits to the local pub and occasional gambling (in which he was shrewd and cautious, from necessity). The Conlons, like many of the Belfast

catholic unskilled working class, lived lives defined and constrained by the bonds of neighbourhood and extended family and by the restrictions of the unionist state.

The troubles From the late 1960s, Gerard (to whom Guiseppe was particularly close) became, to the dismay of his parents, involved in petty crime; when he stole £68 from a neighbour, Sarah repaid it in weekly instalments. Gerard became more reckless as the outbreak of the Northern Ireland troubles in 1969 and the associated massive population movements destabilised the community's social-control mechanisms. The Conlons did not hold strong nationalist views. Sarah's father had fought in the British army during the first world war, and one of her brothers, Patrick, also served in the British army before settling in London in 1957 with his wife Annie (née Smyth). Gerard Conlon recalled that they had only religious pictures (rather than nationalist icons) on their walls, and remembered an incident when he yelled at a British soldier taking shelter from crossfire in their hall and was told by Guiseppe that the soldier could stay as long as he liked since Guiseppe did not wish to risk causing his death. (The prominent Belfast IRA man Brendan Hughes (qv) sheltered in the Conlon house during the Falls Road curfew of 3–5 July 1970, but recalled that Guiseppe's acquiescence was motivated by humanitarianism – as with the soldier – rather than sympathy for the IRA.)

Gerard's continued antisocial behaviour led to his being beaten by the IRA in 1971. He spent time in London, where he worked on building sites, and with a friend from Belfast, Paul Hill, lived in hostels, engaged in minor criminality, and associated with young Irish people involved in the hippie and drug scenes. After an unpleasant experience with hallucinogenic drugs, he returned to his family in Belfast on 19 October 1974.

A fortnight previously, on 5 October 1974, the Provisional IRA had bombed two pubs in Guildford, Surrey, frequented by British army personnel (and by numerous civilians), causing five deaths and many injuries. These bombings were the work of an IRA unit that became known as the 'Balcombe Street gang' (after being captured in Balcombe Street, London, in December 1975). The Guildford attacks, and the Birmingham bombings of 21 November 1974 in which twenty-one people were killed, led to the enactment of a draconian prevention of terrorism act. On 29 November, Paul Hill was arrested, detained and interrogated under the act; under pressure, he implicated acquaintances (including Gerard Conlon) in the Guildford bombings.

Arrests of Gerard and Guiseppe Conlon Early in the morning of 30 November 1974, Gerard was arrested at the Conlon home in Cyprus Street and, after a rough interrogation, was flown to London on the evening of 1 November. While in the custody of Surrey police, Gerard was subjected to abusive interrogation (including threats that if he did not confess, his mother would be targeted by loyalists). He and Paul Hill produced several confessions to the Guildford bombings – each being shown the other's confessions and invited to elaborate on them – which they repudiated as soon as they obtained legal advice. There was a general round-up of

their contacts and acquaintances (two of whom, Patrick Armstrong and his girlfriend Carole Richardson, also confessed under pressure). Hill and Conlon also implicated the latter's aunt Annie Maguire. Several acquaintances named in the confessions were released without charge when they refused to confess and no evidence could be found against them.

Meanwhile, Guiseppe decided that he would go to London to engage legal help for his son. (He was not aware that the prevention of terrorism act meant that Gerard could be questioned for a week before receiving legal assistance.) Guiseppe had travelled to Liverpool in 1969 to retrieve Gerard after an earlier misadventure, but had not been in London since 1957. His doctor, Joe Hendron (later SDLP MP for West Belfast (1992–7)), supplied him with medicine but warned that his health (he suffered from tubercular fibrosis and calcification in both lungs) made it unwise for him to go. Sarah offered to take his place, but Guiseppe was afraid she would lose her job. After notifying the RUC, Guiseppe crossed to England on the night of 2–3 December and travelled to London. As he had been unable to contact his brother-in-law Hugh Maguire (arrested with his wife as part of the Guildford investigation), Guiseppe went to the residence of Patrick and Annie Maguire in Harlesden (north-west London). After contacting the London solicitors and discussing the situation with Annie on her return from work, Guiseppe went to the pub with the other adult men in the house (Patrick, Annie's brother Sean Smyth who was lodging with them, and a friend, Patrick O'Neill, who had called round looking for a babysitter). Annie Maguire and her children remained in the house and were arrested when the police raided it; police went to the pub, had the four men called outside and arrested them. (The house search was less than thorough; when Sarah came to London a week later to give evidence at Guiseppe's unsuccessful bail application, she found his suitcase in the Maguire flat, unopened and untested.) From his arrest until his death in prison, Guiseppe never ceased to protest that he was an innocent man who had nothing to do with explosives, both to anyone who would listen to him and in numerous letters to Sarah.

Trial, conviction and imprisonment In October 1975, the 'Guildford Four' – Gerard Conlon, Hill, Armstrong and Richardson – were tried for the bombings, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Annie Maguire was initially charged with the Guildford bombings, but since she did not confess, proved an alibi, and the confessions of Conlon and Hill could not be used against her, the charge was dropped. Instead, she, her first and third sons (the youngest aged 14), and the four adult men arrested at the pub were charged with possession of explosives on the basis of forensic tests on their hands immediately after their arrests. The tests could not be repeated as the samples were destroyed in the testing process (carried out by an inexperienced technician). It was subsequently found that under certain circumstances other substances could produce a positive result; Guiseppe also suspected his hands had been contaminated during the testing process itself.

The 'Maguire Seven' were tried in January–March 1976 on charges of possessing explosives. (Highly prejudicial descriptions of 'Auntie Annie's bomb factory' had appeared in British newspapers; the fact that she was listed as lead defendant at the 'Maguire Seven' trial – although such listing is normally alphabetical, which would have put Guiseppe first – was seen by some as a deliberate reminder of this adverse publicity.) The prosecution maintained that the Maguires had been part of an IRA supply network, that Guiseppe was an IRA courier warning them of the arrests (of which they were in fact already aware), and that before their arrests they had disposed of explosives hidden in the flat, contaminating their hands in the process. Though the supposed 'bulk of explosives' was never found, police surveillance allowed an extremely limited time for the supposed disposal, and the inventor of the test used to detect explosives gave evidence of its unreliability, all seven were convicted. Guiseppe was sentenced to twelve-years' imprisonment. In prison, the Guildford and Maguire prisoners endured ill treatment by staff and other prisoners.

Sarah Conlon was unable to attend either trial; she was working in the hospital kitchens when she heard of her son's sentence. Twice a year, having saved up money and holiday entitlements, she travelled to England to visit Guiseppe and Gerard, sometimes accompanied by a daughter. Since the Conlons were not IRA members, she did not receive the assistance given to republican prisoners' relatives from support organisations. They often experienced hostility from members of the public near the prisons, who saw them as IRA sympathisers. Before the visits, she and her daughters were subjected to long and intrusive searches and other harassment. Since the visits were supervised, their ability to interact with the prisoners was limited. Sometimes one of the men was moved to another prison at short notice, forcing Sarah to change her travel plans. Sarah and her supporters campaigned unavailingly for the Conlons to be transferred to Northern Ireland prisons.

Sarah's campaign; Guiseppe's death Sarah survived by attention to her work and caring for her daughters, by intense religious observance, and by writing letters every day after work to anyone she thought might help. In later years Gerard was irritated by her repeated injunctions in letters to him that he must forgive and pray for those who had wronged him, but this represented her own experience of how to avoid being consumed by bitterness. There were many times, though, when she despaired at her campaign's lack of progress.

At first only a small number of individuals were involved in the campaign, including Sister Sarah Clarke (qv), Fathers Denis Faul (qv) and Raymond Murray, the Guildford solicitor Alastair Logan, and the politician Gerry Fitt (qv). Gradually others became involved, including Basil Cardinal Hume, Lord Longford (qv), and the MPs Christopher Price and John Biggs-Davison (the latter, a right-wing Conservative and pro-unionist, might be thought an unlikely champion). Some of these, notably Hume and Biggs-Davison, were profoundly influenced by prison visits to Guiseppe, who struck them as transparently innocent.

Appeals by the Maguire Seven (on the grounds that Mr Justice Donaldson's summing up had given undue weight to the prosecution's forensic evidence) and the Guildford Four (since the Balcombe Street gang had admitted to carrying out the bombings and given details only the perpetrators could know) initially gave the prisoners hope but were dismissed, in the latter case through a set of outrageous judicial rationalisations.

On entering Wormwood Scrubs, Guiseppe was prescribed a liquid diet by the prison doctor and told to do only light work and assigned a ground-floor cell. In April 1977 he was transferred to Wakefield prison in Yorkshire. Although this brought him back into contact with Gerard and thus boosted morale, his special diet was discontinued and his health deteriorated; he was transferred back to Wormwood Scrubs in January 1978 but his health had been permanently damaged. After a prison riot, new restrictions led to the electrical element which he needed to prepare his food being removed from his cell, forcing him into 'involuntary hunger strike'.

On 31 December 1979, Guiseppe Conlon, now reduced to four stone in weight, collapsed and was taken to Hammersmith Hospital, where he was placed on a drip and an oxygen mask. Eleven days later, as Sarah arrived to visit him, he was sent back to jail – drip, mask and all – allegedly because of rumours that the IRA were planning to break him out. Guiseppe collapsed again on 18 January and was returned to Hammersmith Hospital, where he died on 23 January 1980 after final visits from some sympathisers (including Fitt and Sister Sarah Clarke) and his son. At death he weighed three-and-a-half stone. Appeals for his release on humanitarian grounds produced no official response, though after his death the home secretary, William Whitelaw (qv), stated that if Guiseppe had recovered he would not have been returned to prison. British Airways refused to fly his remains to Belfast, calling them a security risk, so they were flown to Dublin by Aer Lingus and brought to Belfast by hearse. It was widely noted that there were no paramilitary trappings at Guiseppe's funeral and that the celebrating priest, Fr Vincent McKinley, a prominent critic of the IRA – whom Sarah had recruited to the campaign – openly declared that Guiseppe and his co-accused were innocent victims. Six months later the Home Office sent Sarah a bill for £915 funeral expenses. Shortly after Guiseppe's death, a BBC Northern Ireland *Spotlight* programme (including interviews with Sarah) highlighted the concerns about his case.

Campaign and vindication Guiseppe's death lent further impetus to the campaign, and such prominent figures as the former law lords Devlin and Scarman became involved, but progress was slow. Additional impetus was given by the release on completing their sentences of the remaining members of the Maguire Seven – who then pleaded their case to the public – in the early to mid 1980s, and by the appearance of television documentaries and books by Robert Kee, and by Grant McKee and Ros Franey. Public appeals for the case to be re-examined, however, were repeatedly stalled by statements to the effect that since the appeals process had been exhausted, the government could not reopen the case unless new

evidence was produced, whereas new evidence was unlikely to be produced unless the material on which the conviction was based could be re-examined. In 1987, however, the government agreed to have Avon and Somerset police re-examine the material; this led in 1988 to a decision to refer the case back to the court of appeal. During the subsequent investigations, the solicitor Gareth Peirce obtained access to the records and discovered that alibi evidence had been withheld from the defence, while Avon and Somerset police found evidence that Surrey police had drafted confessions from Patrick Armstrong in advance. The convictions of the Guildford Four were quashed on 19 October 1989. In 1991, the convictions of the Maguire Seven were referred back to the court of appeal and (after some legal jousting about whether an appeal could be heard on behalf of Guiseppe, since he was dead) the convictions were overturned on the grounds that insufficient attention had been given to the possibility that the forensic results were due to innocent contamination. (The prisoners' supporters complained that these grounds minimised the concerns involved in police handling of the case.)

Aftermath The apparent 'happy ending' of the vindication and release of the Guildford Four and Maguire Seven should not disguise the lasting ill effects of their mistreatment and imprisonment. All suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and other conditions derived from their long institutionalisation, several experiencing periods of drug and alcohol abuse which consumed much of their compensation money. None of those involved in their mistreatment was ever convicted. In some quarters a whispering campaign suggested that they had only been freed on a technicality and were really guilty; members of the Maguire family experienced continuing police harassment.

In the opening years of the new century Sarah began a final letter-writing campaign to demand that the British government should publicly declare that Guiseppe and Gerard had been innocent and apologise for their treatment. On 9 February 2005 Prime Minister Tony Blair issued a public apology and vindication in a ceremony at the Palace of Westminster, giving Gerard a private letter for Sarah (who was too frail to attend). This was widely reported at the time as a final triumph for Sarah, who declared that Guiseppe 'was smiling down from heaven'; however, it did not lead to any further financial assistance or counselling (as some had expected) and in 2010 Gerard Conlon described the apology as 'a lie' (*Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2010).

Sarah Conlon died of lung cancer in Belfast on 19 July 2008 and was buried beside Guiseppe. Gerard Conlon remained active in campaigns for judicial reform and the release of other alleged victims of miscarriages of justice, declaring 'I want my father's death to count for something'; he stated that, in the aftermath of the London Underground bombings of 7 July 2005 by Islamist fundamentalists, members of the Muslim community were subjected to the same sort of harassment and injustice as the Irish in Britain had suffered during the troubles. In 2010 a Catholic Worker 'house of hospitality' for refugees and destitute immigrants in Haringey, north London, was named Guiseppe Conlon House.

The Maguire and Guildford cases, with the contemporaneous case of the Birmingham Six (jailed from 1975 to 1991 for the November 1974 Birmingham pub bombings) are recognised as among the most scandalous miscarriages of justice to have occurred within the British legal system. In their response to injustices which would make a statue weep, Guiseppe and Sarah Conlon showed themselves to be remarkable people.

Fictional representations In March 1990 RTÉ broadcast a television docudrama, *Dear Sarah*, directed by Frank Cvitanovic and written by Tom McGurk, based on the prison letters between Guiseppe and Sarah; Sarah was played by Stella McCusker and Guiseppe by Barry McGovern. Sarah discussed her experiences with McCusker before filming but was not given a copy of the script. (In 1993, when McGurk criticised the extensive dramatic liberties taken with the story in the film *In the name of the father*, the Conlon family issued a response pointing out that *Dear Sarah* also employed dramatic licence and had used correspondence whose copyright belonged to the Conlons without obtaining permission.)

The 1993 film *In the name of the father* (dir. Jim Sheridan, adapted by Sheridan and Terry George from Gerard Conlon's memoir *Proved innocent*, with Pete Postlethwaite as Guiseppe (advised by Sarah on the role)) achieved considerable financial and critical success and received seven Academy Award nominations. It has been criticised, however, for the extent to which it uses dramatic licence (for example, the Guildford Four and Maguire Seven are shown being tried simultaneously, with Sarah present in court); the Maguires (who were not consulted in advance) complained that it caricatured Annie and presented her contacts with Gerard Conlon and Paul Hill as much more extensive than in real life.

Ir. Times, 30 Jan., 12, 16 Feb. 1980; 4 Feb. 1981; 19 Apr. 1983; 15 Aug., 14 Sept. 1987; 6 Apr. 1988; 21 Oct., 5 Dec. 1989; 22 Mar. 1990; 5 Feb. 1994; 10 Feb. 2005; *Ir. Press*, 16 Feb. 1980; 26 Oct., 20 Nov. 1989; 23 Mar., 23 May 1990; 9 Apr. 1991; *Sunday Independent*, 15 May 1983; 16 Jan. 1994; 20 July 2008; Robert Kee, *Trial and error: the Maguires, the Guildford pub bombings and British justice* (1986, 1989 eds.); Grant McKee and Ros Franey, *Time bomb: Irish bombers, English justice and the Guildford Four* (1988); *Ir. Independent*, 24 Mar. 1990; 29 Jan., 9 Feb. 1994; 28 Dec. 2012; *Independent* (London), 11 Jan. 1994; Anne Maguire, *Miscarriage of justice: an Irish family's story of wrongful conviction as IRA terrorists* (1994); Sarah Clarke, *No faith in the system: a search for justice* (1995); Patrick Victory, *Justice and truth: the Guildford Four and the Maguire Seven* (2001); Patrick Maguire, *My father's watch: the story of a child prisoner in '70s Britain* (2008); *Guardian*, 22 June 2008; *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2010; Ed Moloney, *Voices from the grave* (2010)

