

Spence, Gusty (Augustus Andrew)

by Patrick Maume

Spence, Gusty (Augustus Andrew) (1933–2011), loyalist paramilitary and community activist, was born on 28 June 1933 at Joseph Street in the Hammer area of the Shankill Road, west Belfast, sixth of seven children (five boys and two girls) of William Edward ('Ned') Spence, labourer and army veteran, and his wife Isabella (née Hayes). Spence's life centred on this tightly knit area, including the neighbouring New Lodge Road and Malvern Street. Ned Spence was a member of the original Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and fought throughout the 1914–18 war in the 36th (Ulster) Division; shortly after demobilisation in 1919 he enlisted in the Royal Artillery and served until the early 1920s. In the 1930s he worked on outdoor relief schemes (Isabella Spence participated in the 1932 Belfast poor law riots), and finished his career as a dustman. Ned Spence was bitter about official ingratitude for his services, and supported the populist, working-class independent unionists Tommy Henderson and J. W. Nixon (qv), and the trade-union movement. Gusty Spence later recalled his childhood poverty to argue that working-class loyalists had been treated as badly as Catholics by the Stormont establishment.

Many other ex-servicemen lived in the area. Two of Gusty Spence's brothers, William ('Billy') (d. 1980) and Robert ('Robbie'), joined the Royal Navy, while another, James, served in the Gordon Highlanders. Another brother, Edward ('Eddie') joined the Communist Party, married a Catholic, and settled in the nationalist Moyard area of west Belfast. (The brothers retained some contact despite their political disagreements, though neither publicised their relationship.) Edward's son Ronnie was active in the Official IRA and then the INLA, serving a sentence on the INLA wing of the Maze prison while his uncle was on the UVF wing.

Gusty Spence received primary education at Riddell Memorial (1938–43) and Hemsworth Square (1943–7) public elementary schools, both in the Shankill area. He passed the qualifying examination for grammar school but his parents could not pay for books and uniform, so he left school aged 14 to work as a barefooted 'bobbin boy' in local linen mills. At age 17 he left the mills, first engaging in house repairs then working intermittently in Mackie's engineering works and as a 'stager' (constructing high scaffolding) in the Harland and Wolff shipyard. Although his father was not an Orangeman, Spence was a member, initially for social reasons, of the junior Orange order, and also joined the Church Lads' Brigade (the family were Church of Ireland). He subsequently joined the Apprentice Boys of Derry and Prince Albert Memorial Temperance LOL 1892, of which his brothers were also members, and later became a member of the Royal Black Preceptory.

Spence married (20 June 1953) Louise ('Louie') Donaldson and moved to her neighbourhood, the religiously mixed Grosvenor Road (between the Falls and

Shankill); they had three daughters and a son. In May 1957 Spence joined the Royal Ulster Rifles. He served in the Cyprus emergency, and became a corporal in the Royal Military Police, but was discharged in April/May 1961 after developing asthma and bronchitis (blamed on the linen mills). Spence admired the image of military Irishness fostered by the regiment, and in later life was an avid collector of militaria associated with the Irish regiments in the British army; he always presented himself as a disciplined soldier. While still serving in the regiment, Spence became involved in the semi-clandestine Ulster Protestant Action (UPA) organisation, of which his brother Billy was a leading member.

On discharge, Spence applied to join the RUC but took a better-paid job in the Post Office; he acquired a reputation as a 'hard man', engaging in drink-fuelled street fights with Catholics. In 1965 he served four months in jail for falsely claiming overtime. (Spence later claimed this was customary practice, and that he was charged only because he refused to name other offenders.) On release, he returned to casual work in the shipyard. He remained active in the UPA, attending protest rallies addressed by Revd Ian Paisley (1926–2014) and organising personation on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP); Billy Spence was secretary of the Belfast West UUP Westminster constituency association and election agent for the Westminster MP, James Kilfedder (qv), in the 1964 and 1966 general elections.

According to Gusty Spence, in 1965 he was approached by two unionist activists, one an MP, and told that the Ulster Volunteer Force was being re-formed on a vigilante basis (as in the 1935 riots) because of the danger to Ulster from the IRA. Spence stated that he and other activists were sworn in at Pomeroy, Co. Tyrone, by a former lieutenant-colonel in the British army, and that he was subsequently appointed military commander of the new force's Shankill cell. Loose contact was maintained with cells elsewhere, but the unit had to acquire its own weapons with money from robberies; various threats and public statements were issued on behalf of the new UVF. Spence always refused to name his alleged UUP sponsors, and denied that Paisley had any connection with the UVF, but claimed the preacher's public statements helped create the atmosphere in which the UVF was formed. For the rest of his life, Spence regarded Paisley as a 'grand old duke of York', who incited others to violence, then disowned them.

Partly in response to republican commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 rising, and fuelled by alcohol, the UVF made several bungled attempts to kill IRA members which became attacks on random Catholics. On 27 May 1966, the UVF petrol-bombed a Catholic-owned off-licence on the Shankill Road. Matilda Gould, a partially crippled Protestant widow who rented part of the premises with her son, was burned and died six weeks later in hospital. On 11 June, John Patrick Scullion was shot and fatally wounded by the UVF on the Falls Road, dying two weeks later; Spence was later charged with the murder but never prosecuted. On 25 June, Spence and several other UVF men, while engaged in late-night drinking in a pub in Malvern Street, decided that four Catholics in the bar were IRA men, and shot

dead Peter Ward, aged 18, and wounded two others. Gould, Scullion and Ward are regarded as the first victims of the Northern Ireland troubles. Spence's 13-year-old nephew Frankie Curry helped to hide the guns used in Malvern Street; Curry later became a leading member of the Red Hand Commando, and committed some 16 to 20 murders.

The killing of Peter Ward provoked widespread outrage; the UVF was banned, and NI Prime Minister Terence O'Neill (qv) accused Paisley of being linked to the murderers, while Paisley disavowed Spence and the UVF in the strongest terms. Spence was arrested on 27 June, and in October 1966 he and two associates were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. One defendant, Hugh McClean, said that Spence shot Peter Ward. Spence always claimed that this confession was fabricated by police and that he had left the pub some time before the shootings (though he admitted his other UVF activities merited imprisonment). At intervals, Spence tried to have his conviction overturned, alleging that the law had been strained to make an example of him and discredit O'Neill's opponents. Shortly after his conviction, he was expelled from the Orange order, with Grand Lodge overriding his own (working-class) lodge. After being threatened on the Grosvenor Road, Spence's wife moved back to the Malvern Street area and brought up the children in straitened circumstances.

Feeling used and abandoned by the UUP hardliners, Spence resisted prison discipline; in his first year in Crumlin Road prison, Belfast, he went on three hunger strikes (lasting successively one week, ten days, and thirty-five days) to secure special treatment. He began a process of self-education, studying Irish history, and came to see the UVF as equivalent to the first plebeian Orangemen of the 1790s, co-opted and manipulated by the gentry.

Initially, Spence was supported only by his extended family and friends and the vestigial Shankill UVF, which staged further bombings to discredit O'Neill. As the troubles escalated, Spence became a folk hero in some working-class loyalist districts, and emerged as the leader of loyalist inmates in Crumlin Road, negotiating with prison officials and republican paramilitaries. He developed particularly close relations with Official IRA inmates and drew on their socialist analysis to claim that working-class loyalists had been exploited by the Stormont government, and that a distinctively working-class unionism that recognised both British and Irish identities should be developed. When the prominent Belfast Official IRA member Joe McCann was killed by British troops (15 April 1972), Spence issued a letter of condolence to his widow (17 April), stating that they were both honourable soldiers.

On 1 July 1972, Spence was released on parole to attend the wedding of his daughter Elizabeth to Winston Churchill Rea (later imprisoned for loyalist paramilitary activities; Spence's brother Robbie was also imprisoned for loyalist violence and died in prison in 1980). The UVF staged a 'kidnap' with Spence's collusion, and he remained at large for four months, reorganising the UVF along

military lines and establishing a youth wing, the Young Citizen Volunteers, to recruit and control volatile teenagers. On 10 July an interview with Spence was broadcast on Granada TV's *World in action* programme, and his image as an 'Orange pimperl' greatly increased recruitment to the UVF.

Spence was rearrested on 4 November 1972 and sent to the Maze prison (Long Kesh), where he became leader of the loyalist inmates (and later, of UVF only). In both Crumlin and the Maze, Spence ran a military-style regime, with intensive drilling and discipline and attempts at political education. Although some inmates detested Spence as a pretentious martinet, he developed a core group of politically aware protégés such as David Ervine (qv) and Billy Hutchinson, who played a significant role in the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) during the 1990s peace process.

In 1977 Spence formally resigned from the UVF (partly for health reasons; he suffered heart attacks in prison). He later advocated non-violence, described himself as a socialist, and established contacts with people from nationalist and catholic backgrounds, many of whom found him sincere and personally charming, including the peace activist Mairead Corrigan and Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich (qv); the latter predicted that Spence would help to bring about peace.

Spence was released from prison in December 1984 and returned to the Shankill, where he lived with his wife Louise in a council bungalow on Malvern Way. After working for the PUP, he became coordinator of the government-funded Shankill Activity Centre, chaired by Billy Blease (qv), which sought to train and assist unemployed youths and ex-prisoners. Spence worked with a variety of peace activists, including Joe Lynch, a Cavan-based former IRA leader at whose funeral Spence spoke in 1993, and Paddy Devlin (qv), who stated that Spence's leftist politics were identical to his own.

In the early 1990s, Spence was among the activists who advised the loyalist paramilitary groups on political strategy and responses to the developing peace process. On 13 October 1994, six weeks after the Provisional IRA had announced a ceasefire, Spence read a statement from the Combined Loyalist Military Command, an umbrella organisation for the paramilitary groups, declaring a ceasefire and expressing 'abject and true remorse' for their 'innocent victims' (this clause added at Spence's insistence). The loyalists emphasised that Spence, having begun the troubles, was announcing their end: 'the alpha and the omega'.

Spence subsequently participated in PUP delegations that visited the USA, and attended the 1994 British Labour Party conference to explain the loyalist position. He also recruited to the PUP some community workers with no paramilitary involvement (notably Dawn Purvis, PUP leader (2007–10)). Spence was involved with the PUP team that participated in the negotiations leading to the Belfast agreement of 10 April 1998. When the journalist Peter Taylor put Spence on the phone to Peter Ward's

elderly mother Mary, he asked her forgiveness, which she granted on condition he brought peace to Northern Ireland.

Anti-agreement loyalists claimed Spence and his associates were 'communists' being used by the British government to impose a sell-out. After Frankie Curry (who sided with Billy Wright (qv) and his associates) was shot dead by UDA members on the Shankill Road on 17 March 1999, there were widespread rumours that Spence had sanctioned his nephew's death; these should be regarded in the context of a black propaganda war between savagely embattled factions. On 19 August 2000, clashes between UVF and UDA supporters on the Shankill – orchestrated by the volatile west Belfast UDA leader Johnny Adair – were followed by the expulsion from the lower Shankill of UVF supporters, including many of the extended Spence family. Spence and his wife had gone to a caravan that they owned in Groomsport, Co. Down, but UDA rioters smashed up their home and stole Spence's collection of militaria. The Spences never returned to live on the Shankill, but settled in Groomsport. Spence saw this as personal betrayal by his neighbourhood, and attributed Louise's illness and death (December 2002) to the trauma.

Although the PUP proved more cohesive and effective than its UDA counterparts (due in large part to the cadres politically educated by Spence), it failed to develop beyond a niche party, dependent on a few individuals and hindered by continuing identification with UVF criminality. Despite ill health, Spence remained active in the PUP, and on 2 May 2007 read out a UVF statement that its arms would no longer be accessible to ordinary members. After more loyalist feuding, in May 2010 he publicly called on the UVF to disband. He was supported by the new PUP leader Brian Ervine, but denounced by former associates in the *Purple Standard*, a UVF-linked paper (though after his death the same paper hailed him as a loyalist hero).

Gusty Spence died in the Ulster Hospital, outside Belfast in Dundonald, Co. Down, on 24 September 2011 of long-term respiratory illness. His funeral was held on 28 September at St Michael's church in the Shankill; he had requested there should be no UVF trappings, and the ceremonial emphasised his service in the Royal Ulster Rifles. He was buried in Clondeboye cemetery, Bangor, Co. Down.

Most commentators at Spence's death emphasised his important role in the peace process and the genuineness of his remorse, but opinions differed about whether this could atone for his earlier crimes. Critics such as Raymond McCord, whose son was killed by the UVF in 1997, complained that Spence's continued association with the UVF and failure to condemn their crimes until 2010 rendered him complicit in their activities. (Spence maintained that while he believed violence was counter-productive, formal condemnation would end his ability to move loyalism towards peace.) Perhaps the fairest verdict is that while he genuinely regretted his actions and worked for reconciliation, having once embraced the tar baby he could never completely shake free.

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