

Wilson, (William) Gordon

by Patrick Maume

Wilson, (William) Gordon (1927–95), peace campaigner, was born 25 September 1927 at Manorhamilton, Co. Leitrim, the eldest of four children of George Edward Wilson, draper, of Manorhamilton, and his wife Etta (Henrietta, née Conn), a nurse, of Ballykelly, Co. Londonderry. The family later moved to Enniskillen, where they opened a second store, while retaining the Manorhamilton business. Educated at Masterson primary school, Manorhamilton, and Wesley College, Dublin, in 1945 Wilson moved to Enniskillen to help run his father's drapery store. It was in Northern Ireland that he got his first real experience of sectarianism at a local level. As the business drew custom from both sides of the community, and some local protestants suspected him as a 'blow-in' from the south, he kept his own counsel; he later publicly expressed regret that 'as a young man I did not stand up and speak out against injustice and wrongs because I regarded politicians as hard men'.

Wilson held many civic posts before he came to widespread attention, including the presidency of the Rotary Club and Enniskillen chamber of commerce. In 1981 he served as high sheriff for Co. Fermanagh and from 1982 onwards acted as a JP. He was a 32nd-degree freemason and played golf at the Murvagh course near Enniskillen; he also represented Ireland at bowls. He married a music teacher from Enniskillen – his wife's name was Joan – with whom he had one surviving son (another died in infancy) and two daughters. He suffered a minor stroke in 1986 but made a full recovery. The family were devout members of Darling Street methodist church, Enniskillen.

On Remembrance Sunday (8 November) 1987 his life changed dramatically when a bomb planted by the IRA exploded at the cenotaph in Enniskillen's main square as crowds gathered for a service to commemorate the dead of two world wars. The bomb brought down a wall on a large group of people sheltering from the rain as they waited for the parade, including Wilson and his younger daughter, twenty-year-old Marie, a trainee nurse. Trapped under six feet of rubble, Wilson held his daughter's hand and they spoke to each other as she became unconscious. A few hours later she died at the Erne Hospital from her injuries. Eleven people lost their lives and sixty-three were seriously injured. Although the perpetrators regarded the ceremony (and another at Tullyhommon in west Fermanagh on the same day, where a bomb failed to explode) as legitimate targets because of the presence of security force personnel, it was regarded by most non-republicans as an indiscriminate and bitterly sectarian attack. That night, Gordon Wilson (who had been badly shaken and suffered a dislocated shoulder) spoke movingly on BBC radio about the last few words he had exchanged with his dying daughter. His deep Christian convictions shone through when he offered prayers for the bombers and declared that talk of revenge was futile.

Wilson failed to realise the full impact his words would have. His dignified description of the events of the day was relayed around the world, and he became the embodiment of the desire for peace; over the following days he was repeatedly interviewed by newspaper, television, and radio journalists, and felt an obligation to speak despite his pain and exhaustion. (Most other families felt unable or unwilling to give interviews.) Loyalist sources later revealed that Wilson's statement played a significant role in deterring loyalists from murdering catholic civilians in revenge for the Enniskillen murders (though the loyalist Michael Stone later cited Enniskillen as justification for his attack on a republican funeral crowd in Milltown cemetery, Belfast).

Wilson's acceptance of the tragedy as God's will led him to believe that he had been spared for a purpose – namely, to contribute to the search for peace within Northern Ireland. He sold his business, feeling himself physically and mentally unable to continue running it. He spoke in numerous forums of the need for understanding and reconciliation. His simple message, and the direct language in which it was conveyed, together with the anguish he personally had endured, left a lasting impression on the minds of the public; he received thousands of letters of sympathy. A month after the bombing he was voted 'man of the year' in a BBC poll. Other distinctions included his winning of the World Methodist Peace Award.

In 1990 Wilson produced a book about Marie's life and death; he followed this with numerous public speaking engagements in Ireland and Britain. His heroism, and the fact that he had been brought up to distrust the public expression of emotion, concealed the extent to which his last years were consumed by grief and pain. He suffered from intermittent insomnia, tired easily, and became very sensitive to noise. Seven weeks after the attack he suffered a day-long amnesic episode and had to be admitted to hospital, though this problem did not recur.

Wilson's image as the face of Enniskillen was not universally accepted. Some victims felt that Wilson's heroic example made it socially unacceptable for them to admit to feelings of grief or anger, though he always emphasised that he spoke only for his own family, and tried to consult local people before taking particular actions. Some individuals even claimed that his 'forgiveness' of the bombers – he did not in fact use the term – made him an accessory after the fact to his daughter's murder, and certain fundamentalists accused him of acting as a catspaw for ecumenism because he was prepared to work with catholic clerics.

In February 1993 Wilson accepted nomination to the seanad by the then taoiseach, Albert Reynolds; this decision was criticised by some unionists. Wilson hoped to act as a bridge for understanding between the two traditions and a public reminder of the Enniskillen horror. He did, in fact, display a degree of political shrewdness in using his moral authority to influence public opinion. Within a month of taking his seat he publicly requested a meeting with the IRA in an effort to persuade it to renounce violence, an action criticised as politically naive by many commentators

and some bereaved relatives. Wilson was driven by the hope that meeting him face to face might make some impact on the terrorists, and by a sense of obligation to do all he could for peace; after the meeting on 7 April 1993 he returned pale and exhausted, feeling that 'they didn't seem to care how many people were killed'. In November 1993 he turned his attention to persuading the loyalist paramilitaries to forsake their guns, and had a meeting with loyalist spokesmen on the Shankill. When the Reynolds government fell in November 1994, Wilson offered to resign his seat, the only one of the taoiseach's eleven nominees to do so. His offer was rejected by the incoming government, but for many this gesture underlined his fundamental sense of what was honourable and just.

Wilson supported the Downing Street declaration of John Major (British prime minister 1990–97) and Albert Reynolds (taoiseach 1992–4), and in August 1994 enthusiastically welcomed the IRA ceasefire. He wholeheartedly undertook to build on this development by helping to create a lasting peace at ground level in the north. In October that year he was appointed to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation at Dublin castle, where he angered many unionists by declaring that a united Ireland was inevitable at some stage (though he considered himself to be a unionist). In the meantime, he called for the removal of articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution (which declared the whole island of Ireland to be part of the national territory, irrespective of the wishes of Northern Ireland's inhabitants) and the institution of power-sharing within Northern Ireland on the model of the 1973 Sunningdale agreement. He also took the opportunity to defend the RUC against accusations of wholesale sectarianism.

In December 1994 Wilson's only son, Peter, was killed in a road accident, leaving a widow and two children. As an escape from this second shattering blow to the family Wilson flung himself into renewed peace work. He died at home in Enniskillen on 27 June 1995 of a heart attack; his funeral took place on 29 June, and he was buried at Breandrum cemetery. He disparaged those who sought to glorify him and wished he could have returned to his earlier life as 'a wee provincial draper'; but few would have disagreed with the alliance politician Seamus Close, who called him 'a walking saint'.

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GRO; *Times*, 12–14 Nov. 1987; Gordon Wilson and Alf McCreary, *Marie: a story from Enniskillen* (1990); *Irish Independent*, 1 Sept. 1994; *Ir. Times*, 8 Dec. 1994; *Belfast Telegraph*, 27–9 June 1995; *Irish News*, 28–9 June 1995; *Irish Independent*, 28 June 1995; *Ir. Times*, 28 June 1995; *Sunday World* (Northern edition), 2 July 1995; Alf McCreary, *Gordon Wilson: an ordinary hero* (1996); McRedmond; Denzil McDaniel, *Enniskillen: the Remembrance Sunday bombing* (1997); <http://www.enniskillenfreemasons.co.uk/enniskillen.htm> (accessed 25 May 2005)

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