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THE IRISH VERSION

XIII

Colour work:
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 **CINEBOOK**
The 9th Art Publisher

Original title: La version irlandaise

Original edition: © Dargaud Benelux (Dargaud-Lombard SA), 2007
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English translation: © 2012 Cinebook Ltd

Translator: Jerome Saincantin

Lettering and text layout: Imadjinn
Printed in Spain by Just Colour Graphic

This edition first published in Great Britain in 2013 by
Cinebook Ltd
56 Beech Avenue
Canterbury, Kent
CT4 7TA
www.cinebook.com

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84918-145-7



A quick historical recap before we begin:

Ireland was colonised by the English from the 12th century, when Henry II Plantagenet invaded the country. After centuries of occupation, punctuated by terrible acts (notably the destruction of churches and the deportation of Catholics by Cromwell), the first signs of a nationwide effort towards independence appeared at the end of the 18th century and continued all through the 19th century—each time brutally suppressed by the British.

The first nationalist party, Sinn Féin (“We ourselves” in Gaelic) was founded in 1905. In 1919, two pro-independence armed groups, the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers, were merged into the newly created IRA (Irish Republican Army).

In 1921, London agreed to the creation of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) as a dominion of the crown. However, the northeastern part of the island, the six counties of Ulster—whose population was two-thirds Protestants and English landowners—remained part of the United Kingdom.

By the end of 1937, Southern Ireland adopted a new constitution and ceased being a simple British dominion to become a sovereign state under the name Eire. It wasn’t until 1949, however—after remaining neutral during the Second World War—that it left the Commonwealth and became the Republic of Ireland as we know it today. Sinn Féin always refused the partition of Northern Ireland, and that part of the IRA that also refused it became the secret organisation we now know. It officially declared war on Great Britain in December 1938 and began its terrorist operations the following month.

In Northern Ireland, law enforcement was (until 2001) in the hands of the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary), with 90% made up of Irish Protestants. After the August 1969 riots in Belfast and Londonderry (Derry to the pro-independence Republicans), Great Britain permanently stationed troops in support of the local police.

At the end of 1969, the IRA split into two factions: the Official IRA, which, like Sinn Féin, wanted to continue the fight through institutional means and negotiation, and the Provisional IRA (in reference to the 1916 Provisional Government whose members were almost all executed by the British), which chose to continue the armed struggle—a struggle that was mostly limited to terrorist attacks. “Bloody Friday” of July 21, 1972, which killed nine and injured 130 in Belfast. The assassination of Lord Mountbatten in County Sligo in August 1979. The failed attempt on Margaret Thatcher’s life in Brighton on October 12, 1984. And the mortar attack against No. 10 Downing Street (also a failure) in February 1991.

In response, the British passed a law in 1971 that would allow, within Ulster, the internment without warrant or trial of any suspect. In 1980, the British Government removed the interned IRA volunteers’ status as political prisoners..

To counter the IRA, nationalist and republican, the Irish Protestants (called Loyalists, Unionists or Orangemen, in reference to William III of Orange-Nassau, who propagated Protestantism in Northern Europe after defeating the Catholic troops of James II in 1690) also created a paramilitary force, the UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters), whose activity was limited, beyond a few isolated assassinations, to street fighting against Catholics.

After long and difficult negotiations that led to the Good Friday accords of 1998, the various parties agreed to a ceasefire, followed in 2000 by the partial withdrawal of British troops and the suspension—but not the dissolution—of both IRAs, the Official and the Provisional. In August 2005, the IRA officially laid down its arms. Will Northern Ireland finally live in peace? We all hope so.

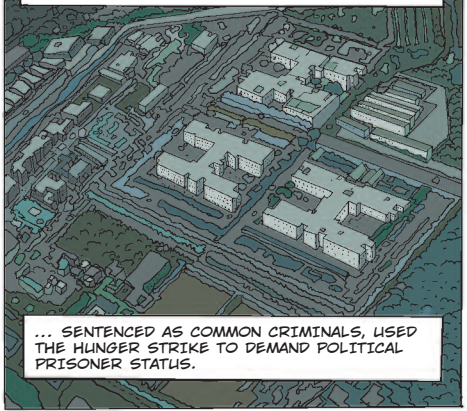
JEAN VAN HAMME

BELFAST, THE EIGHTIES...

THROUGHOUT THE TRAGIC 20TH CENTURY, HUNGER STRIKES WERE THE ONLY MEANS OF PROTEST LEFT TO THE IRISH NATIONALISTS IMPRISONED BY THE ENGLISH OCCUPIER.



THAT YEAR, AT HM PRISON MAZE, 10 VOLUNTEERS OF THE PROVISIONAL IRA...



... SENTENCED AS COMMON CRIMINALS, USED THE HUNGER STRIKE TO DEMAND POLITICAL PRISONER STATUS.

LIKE SO MANY OTHERS BEFORE THEM, THEY REFUSED...



THE LAW FORBODE THEIR GUARDS FROM FEEDING THEM BY FORCE, AND THREE OF THEM HAD ALREADY DIED OF STARVATION AND EXHAUSTION...



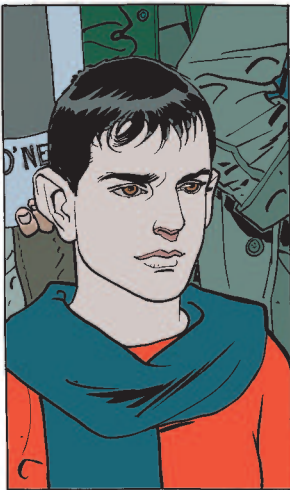
... TO WEAR THE SAME UNIFORM AS COMMON CRIMINALS AND ROTTED IN THEIR FREEZING CELLS, CLAD ONLY IN A DIRTY, THREADBARE COVER. THEY WERE CALLED THE "BLANKETMEN."

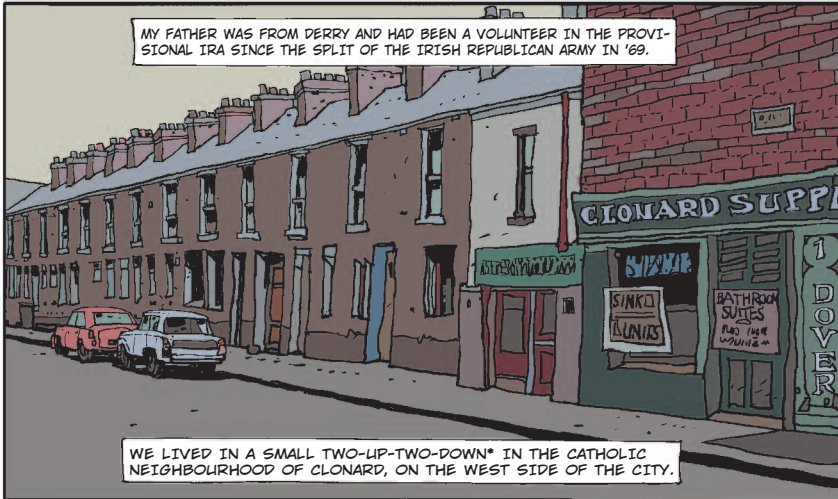


... BUT, DESPITE THE PRESSURE OF INTERNATIONAL OPINION, THE GOVERNMENT OF HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY REFUSED TO GIVE IN TO THEIR DEMANDS.

MY FATHER, BRENDAN O'NEIL, WAS AMONG THE SEVEN SURVIVORS. IT WAS THE 56TH DAY OF HIS HUNGER STRIKE, DURING WHICH HE DRANK ONLY WATER...

I WAS 13, AND MY KID SISTER CIARA...





MY FATHER WAS FROM DERRY AND HAD BEEN A VOLUNTEER IN THE PROVISIONAL IRA SINCE THE SPLIT OF THE IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY IN '69.

WE LIVED IN A SMALL TWO-UP-TWO-DOWN* IN THE CATHOLIC NEIGHBOURHOOD OF CLONARD, ON THE WEST SIDE OF THE CITY.



BRENDAN O'NEIL HAD BEEN ARRESTED IN '79 DURING THE RAIDS THAT FOLLOWED THE ASSASSINATION OF LORD MOUNTBATTEN, THE QUEEN'S UNCLE, IN COUNTY SLIGO. HE'D BEEN SENTENCED—WITH NO EVIDENCE—TO 30 YEARS IN PRISON.

SINCE THEN, ALL MY MOTHER HAD EARNED WAS A SMALL STIPEND FROM THE SINN FÉIN'S SOCIAL SERVICES, ALTHOUGH SHE MADE A FEW EXTRA PENNIES BY DOING THE ODD SEWING JOB FROM HOME.



WE DIDN'T HAVE MUCH OF ANYTHING. WE ATE MEAT ONLY ONCE A WEEK.



IN THE EVENINGS, AFTER SCHOOL, I'D JOIN MY MATES. WE CALLED OURSELVES THE "YOUNG FENIANS," AFTER THOSE IRISH REPUBLICANS WHO IMMIGRATED TO AMERICA IN THE 19TH CENTURY.

OUR MAIN DISTRACTION, WHEN WE WEREN'T PLAYING FOOTBALL IN AN EMPTY PLOT, WAS TO FIGHT WITH THE LOYALIST KIDS OF SHANKILL, THE PROTESTANT NEIGHBOURHOOD TO THE NORTH.



BACK HOME, HATRED WAS PASSED DOWN FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.



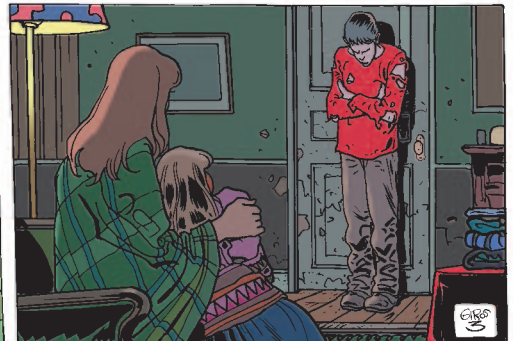
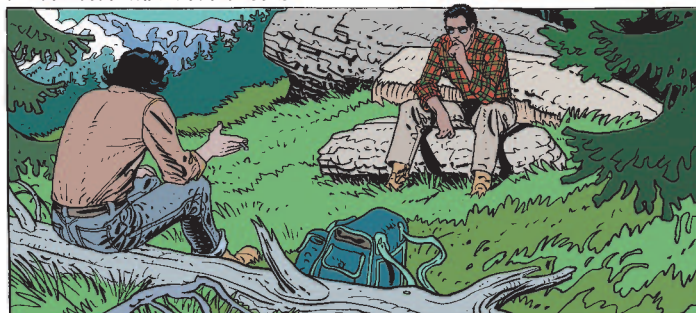
**FOR THE REPUBLIC!
CHARGE!**

*SMALL HOUSES BUILT FOR WORKERS, WITH TWO ROOMS UPSTAIRS, TWO DOWNSTAIRS, OFTEN HOUSING A DIFFERENT FAMILY ON EACH FLOOR



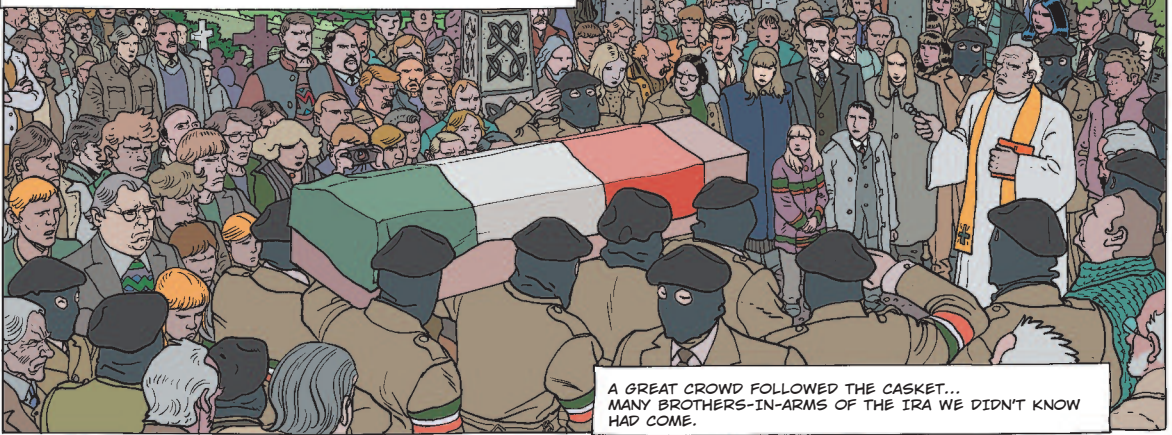
THOSE BASTARD PIGS FROM THE RUC, THE ROYAL ULSTER CONSTABULARY, WERE ALMOST ALL PROTESTANTS. EVEN WORSE THAN THE ENGLISH... THEY'D WATCH OUR FIGHTS FROM A DISTANCE AND ONLY INTERVENE IF OUR OPPONENTS LOOKED LIKE THEY WERE LOSING...

THAT EVENING, WHEN I CAME HOME, MY MOTHER TOLD ME MY FATHER HAD DIED.



*A DEROGATORY NICKNAME FOR IRISH CATHOLICS AND NATIONALISTS, DERIVED FROM THE PRONUNCIATION OF THE THEN-COMMON IRISH GIVEN NAME TADHG

MY MOTHER HAD TO FILE THE NECESSARY PAPERWORK TO RETRIEVE THE BODY. THE FUNERAL TOOK PLACE FOUR DAYS LATER AT THE MILLTOWN CATHOLIC GRAVEYARD.



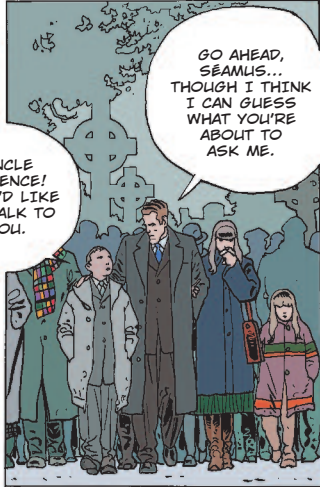
A GREAT CROWD FOLLOWED THE CASKET... MANY BROTHERS-IN-ARMS OF THE IRA WE DIDN'T KNOW HAD COME.

ALSO TERENCE PARNELL, MY MOTHER'S OLDER BROTHER. I WAS VAGUELY AWARE THAT HE WAS ONE OF THE LEADERS OF THE VOLUNTEERS FOR THE BELFAST AREA.

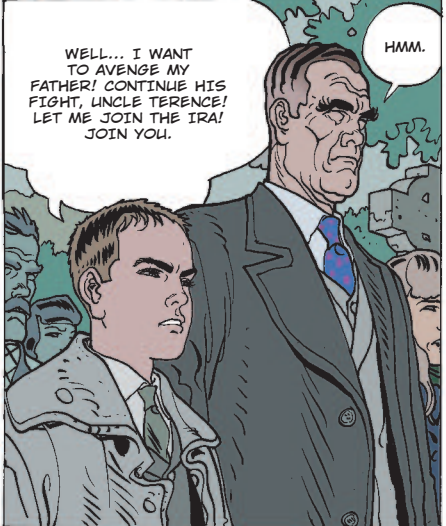
I TOOK A CHANCE AND SPOKE TO HIM AS WE LEFT THE GRAVEYARD.



UNCLE TERENCE! I... I'D LIKE TO TALK TO YOU.

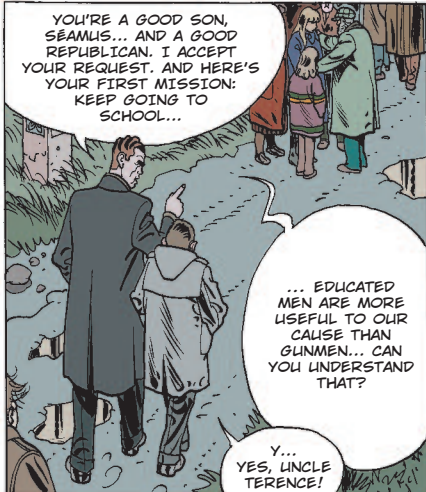


GO AHEAD, SEAMUS... THOUGH I THINK I CAN GUESS WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO ASK ME.



WELL... I WANT TO AVENGE MY FATHER! CONTINUE HIS FIGHT, UNCLE TERENCE! LET ME JOIN THE IRA! JOIN YOU.

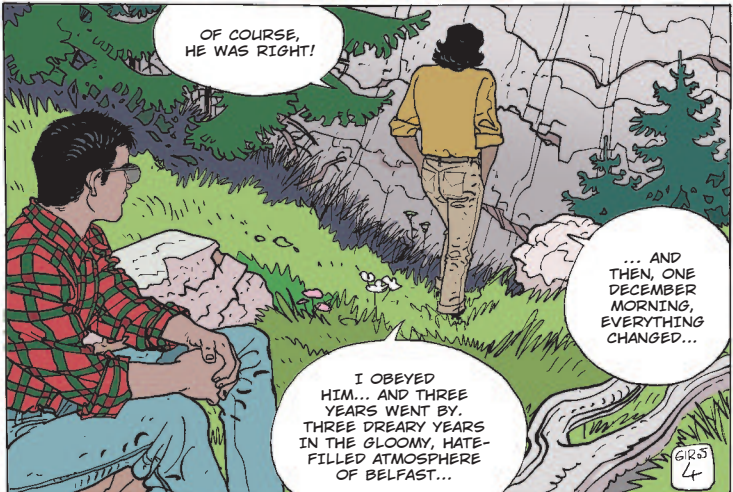
HMM.



YOU'RE A GOOD SON, SEAMUS... AND A GOOD REPUBLICAN. I ACCEPT YOUR REQUEST. AND HERE'S YOUR FIRST MISSION: KEEP GOING TO SCHOOL...

... EDUCATED MEN ARE MORE USEFUL TO OUR CAUSE THAN GUNMEN... CAN YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?

Y... YES, UNCLE TERENCE!



OF COURSE, HE WAS RIGHT!

... AND THEN, ONE DECEMBER MORNING, EVERYTHING CHANGED...

I OBEYED HIM... AND THREE YEARS WENT BY. THREE DREARY YEARS IN THE GLOOMY, HATE-FILLED ATMOSPHERE OF BELFAST...

6/23/4