

# Explosive Journey: Perceptions of Latin America in the FARC-IRA Affair (2001-2005)

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The IRA's alleged connections with FARC, which surfaced in 2001 and continue to appear in the Irish and Colombian media, are an ideal opportunity to analyse perceptions of Latin America in Ireland. Newspaper articles, personal interviews, and the judgement of the Appeals Court in Bogotá have been used to study different attitudes in this puzzling affair, which can be viewed as one of the lowest points in Irish relations with Colombia - and perhaps with Latin America as a whole.



**Figure 1.** "Free the Colombia 3. Tried by the media. No possible chance of a fair trial. Tabhair abhaile iad! Their lives are in mortal danger. Bring Them Home." Mural at A1/Clonti Road, south of Newry, South Armagh (Northern Ireland). Artist unknown, May 2003, © Dr. Jonathan McCormick.

*Peut-être comme moi / les croyais-tu, naguère  
Fils de Che Guevara / et porteurs de lumière,  
Mais leur lutte finale / leur matin du grand soir  
C'est la haine et le mal / et surtout les dollars.*

Renaud, "Dans la jungle"  
(Emi-Virgin France, 2005)

When the songwriter Renaud launched *Dans la jungle* in December 2005 to support Ingrid Betancourt and other hostages abducted in Colombia, some were surprised to hear in the lyrics certain echoes of the war on terror currently being waged by the United States and other governments. Betancourt, a Colombian politician who adopted

French citizenship and founded Oxígeno Verde green party, was kidnapped on 23 February 2003 by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The song itself is a continuation of Renaud's long career as a writer of protest songs. He highlighted the double standards of Colombian guerrillas who claimed to wish to improve society and yet became a criminal army. However, one could perceive in the French songwriter's most recent work a common worldview in which Latin America is depicted as a "jungle", or a place steeped in corruption, chaos and turmoil, in contrast to the supposed honesty and civilisation of life and politics in Europe.

The Irish Republican Army's (IRA) alleged connections with FARC surfaced in 2001 and continue to appear in the Irish and Colombian media. I consider the ongoing affair an ideal opportunity to analyse perceptions of Latin America in present-day Ireland. For the purposes of this article I used the limited number of relevant documents available to the public, together with online newspaper articles and interviews conducted by email. Rather than unveiling new information or undertaking a definitive account, the object of this article is to examine opinions that reveal values and beliefs regarding Latin America and its cultures.

## Gangs of Colombia

Among Colombian rebel groups, according to the US Department of State, FARC "is the oldest, largest, most capable, and best-equipped insurgency of Marxist origin" (US Navy NPS2005). "Foreign citizens are often targets of FARC kidnapping for ransom. The FARC has well-documented ties to the full range of narcotics trafficking activities, including taxation, cultivation, and distribution." It comprises "approximately 9,000 to 12,000 armed combatants and several thousand more supporters, mostly in rural areas" (US Navy NPS 2005). Several of the recruits are under eighteen years old and a third are women.



**Figure 2.** FARC training at San Vicente del Caguán (Donnade Cesare, 2001).

FARC has proclaimed itself a political-military Marxist-Leninist organisation inspired by Bolivarian ideals.<sup>1</sup> It claims to represent the rural poor in opposition to Colombia's wealthy classes and opposes US influence in the region and neo-liberal policies. FARC was created on 27 May 1964 during Operation Marquetalia, when the

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<sup>1</sup> FARC-EP website.

Colombian Army overran this enclave held by peasant guerrillas, with key leaders such as Manuel Marulanda Vélez and Jacobo Arenas. The first conference was organised in 1965 and was attended by 100 guerrillas. Internal feuds resulted in a lack of unified strategies until 1974, when a metamorphosis was implemented from a guerrilla force into a revolutionary army. After the sixth conference in 1978, FARC operated in the Guayabero area. In 1982 the official name was changed to Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP), and the political-military Bolivarian Campaign was launched. A cease fire was negotiated with the Colombian government in late 1984, and FARC supported the parliamentary candidates of the Patriotic Union party. Murders by the regular armed forces and paramilitary groups provoked a violation of the armistice and FARC resumed fighting in 1987. A new peace process began in 1991 but lasted only until 1992. Intensive military campaigns led by FARC resulted in another round of negotiations with the government. In the hope of negotiating a peace settlement, on 7 November 1998 president Andrés Pastrana granted FARC a 42,000 sq. km safe haven at San Vicente del Caguán in Caquetá department. This was the condition which FARC dictated for the initiation of peace talks. The peace process came to a halt in February 2002 after a series of high-profile actions, among them the kidnapping of political figures. FARC's international connections include links with Cuba and with radical groups in Latin America, most notably in Peru and more recently in Paraguay.

One of the paramilitary groups combating FARC, the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) is portrayed as an armed organisation that protects local economic, social and political interests by fighting Marxist insurgents, citing the excuse that the Colombian government has historically failed to do so. Its forces are estimated at between 10,000 and 20,000 militants, and it is considered a terrorist organisation by most countries, including the US. In 2000, former AUC leader Carlos Castaño Gil claimed that 70 per cent of the AUC's operation costs were financed through drug-related activities. Both FARC and AUC are accused of being key players in contraband drug production and distribution, and are therefore targets of the internationally-sponsored Plan Colombia.

With the primary aims of bolstering Colombia's social and economic development, combating the drug production and trade, strengthening government institutions, and ending armed conflict with insurgent groups, Plan Colombia was launched by the administration of president Andrés Pastrana in October 1999. Over one third of the original budget of US\$7.5 billion was pledged by the international community. The Clinton administration in the US donated US\$1.3 billion, and assigned military personnel to train local forces, and experts to assist in the eradication of coca plantations. These contributions to the plan made Colombia the third largest recipient of foreign aid from the US at that time. Further funding from the Bush administration was approved under the provisions of the Andean Counterdrug Initiative. Support from the European Union and some countries outside the EU met with little co-operation amid severe criticism, in particular of the procedure of aerial fumigation to eradicate coca. This activity allegedly damages legal crops and has adverse effects on the health of those exposed to the herbicides. Critics of the initiative also claim that elements within the Colombian security forces who receive aid and training from the Plan may be involved in supporting the AUC paramilitary forces. Moreover, recent

research has shown that Colombia's economic problems are more related to political violence than to the drug trade in itself.<sup>2</sup>

### **Los Tres Monos**<sup>3</sup>

On 11 August 2001, John Joseph Kelly, Edward Joseph Campbell and David Bracken were detained in Bogotá's El Dorado airport while attempting to leave Colombia (Appeals Court sentence, p. 2).<sup>4</sup> On the basis of intelligence from former guerrillas, the three men were suspected of being IRA explosives experts hired by FARC to provide military training to their fighters. The three admitted that their real names were Martin John McCauley, James William Monaghan and Niall Connolly, respectively, and that they had arrived from San Vicente del Caguán, an area under rebel control that had previously been liberated and demilitarised for the peace negotiations. The military police officer Captain Wber Pulido Parada arrested the trio and handed them over to the Colombian courts (18).

After the preliminary investigation, the public prosecutor charged them of conducting training for illegal activities and travelling on false passports, charges that were denied by the defendants in their pre-trial depositions of 14 and 15 August 2001. The three men added that they were visiting the liberated area as tourists and later as observers of the peace process. The Interpol local branch identified McCauley and Monaghan as IRA members and explosives experts, and confirmed that the three men were travelling on passports obtained through fraudulent methods. Tests on explosive substances were performed by the US Embassy expert Anthony M. Hall on the possessions of the three men using General Electric Itemiser technology. The samples tested positive for traces of nitro, tetril, HMX (high melting explosive), TNT, and ammonium nitrate, among other substances (98). On 21 August 2001 the judge remanded the men in custody and on 15 February 2002 they were officially charged by the prosecution.



**Figure 3.** Niall Connolly, Martin McCauley and James Monaghan portrayed in a mural at Levin Road, Killwilke, Lurgan, Co. Armagh (Artist unknown, May 2003, © Dr. Jonathan McCormick)

Monaghan, McCauley and Connolly (or *Los Tres Monos*, as they were styled in Colombia) had been seen by witnesses in the FARC-controlled area since 1998 (83-95). Marcos Trujillo Celada saw one of them in August 1998 at Donde Robert with

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<sup>2</sup> Holmes, Jennifer S. and Sheila Amin Gutiérrez de Piñeres, "The Illegal Drug Industry. Violence and the Colombian Economy: A Department Level Analysis" in *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 25:1 (January 2006), pp. 104-118.

<sup>3</sup> In Colombian Spanish, "Los tres monos" translates as "The three blondes" (without gender connotations).

<sup>4</sup> The account of the arrest and trial was taken from the Appeals Court sentence of 16 December 2004. Page numbers of the sentence are indicated between brackets.

many other persons, among them a FARC commanding officer known as Julián. Giovanni Escobar Polania declared that they had shown FARC combatants a video about explosives in Ireland. John Alexander Rodríguez had seen them carrying out explosives training in late 1998, mid-1999, late 2000 and 2001. Rodríguez added that during their second visit they carried missile launchers with them. Furthermore, the men's passports recorded visits to Venezuela, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama from July 1999 to April 2001, while their real passports - those issued on their real names - were used to leave Ireland, stopping at Paris and Madrid.

According to Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC, now PSNI) officers Garry Ian Clark and Christopher Kenneth Johnson, James Monaghan had been arrested in Ireland for use of explosives and for IRA membership. He had escaped from a Dublin courtroom using an explosive. He was re-arrested, sentenced to ten years, and freed in 1985. Martin McCauley had been arrested in 1994 and sentenced to two years for possession of arms and rocket attacks. He was wounded during the arrest. He was allegedly involved in a murder, though his participation has never been proven. Niall Connolly was Sinn Féin's representative in Cuba. In 2001 he had tried to obtain a false passport in Northern Ireland (55). Captain Pulido and other Colombian officers further stated that as a result of IRA training provided to FARC guerrillas, there had been an increase in terrorist activities, including mortar launching from 1999 to 2004, a technique pioneered in Europe by IRA explosives experts (118).

James William Monaghan [Edward Joseph Campbell] declared that he had been born in Ireland on 9 August 1945 and had worked with the railway as a metallurgic technician. In 1999 he was granted a position with an organisation called Coiste na n-larchimí (Ex-Prisoners' Committee), whose primary aim was to help former Republican prisoners to reintegrate into society and to enable them to use their abilities to shape the new society that would emerge from the Irish Peace Process. In 1972 he was arrested in London and given a prison sentence for the use of military equipment. He confirmed that he was also sentenced for placing explosives in a courtroom (73-75). Martin John McCauley [John Joseph Kelly] said he had been born on 1 December 1962 in County Armagh. He admitted that he had been convicted of the use of arms in Ireland and wounded in a fight. He arrived in Bogotá from Paris, in the company of Monaghan, on an Air France flight (75-76). Niall Connolly [David Bracken], born on 5 December 1964, stated that he had worked as a translator and lived in Havana with his partner, a Cuban national, and two children (76-77). He arrived in Bogotá via Madrid and Caracas.

The British explosives expert Keith Borer was called in as a witness for the defence. Although he acknowledged that he was not familiar with FARC techniques, Borer declared that the methods in use by the IRA and FARC were not similar. He analysed the results of the first explosive traces tests and though he recognised that the Itemiser was a very accurate instrument, he added that further tests were negative because the first samples may have been contaminated (107-117).

Other witnesses testified for the defence, including Ross O'Sullivan, Seán Ciarán Ó Domhnaill, Laurence Patrick McKeown, Síle Maguire and Michael McLaren. The testimony of the latter witness ultimately worked in favour of the prosecution as he presented electronically-manipulated videos in an attempt to prove that Monaghan had not been in Colombia at the time that he was charged with training guerrillas in San Vicente del Caguán (126). Further documents included tax payment certificates but

there were no records for the periods during which Monaghan had been seen in Colombia. Ultimately, the defence failed to present evidence in the form of notes, interviews or recordings to establish that the three men had been conducting social research on, or studying, the peace process (79).

On 26 April 2004, Bogotá's First Penal Court Judge Jairo Acosta acquitted the three Irishmen of the most serious charge of training for illegal activities which carried a 15 to 20-year sentence, but sentenced Monaghan to three and half years, McCauley to three years and Connolly to two years for travelling on false passports. They were released on probation while the prosecution appealed the sentence. The appeal was successful at the Appeals Court on 16 December 2004. This court also reversed the acquittal on the charge of training guerrillas, sentencing Niall Connolly and James W. Monaghan to seventeen and a half years each, and ordering them to pay a fine of approximately US\$280,000. The Court sentenced John McCauley to seventeen years with a fine of approximately US\$217,000. The three men were to be deported from Colombia after they had completed their prison sentences.

However, at the time of the sentencing they were no longer in Colombia as they had jumped bail. In spite of the international arrest warrant issued for Monaghan, McCauley and Connolly, they managed to flee the country and on 15 September 2005 were safely back in Ireland, just eight days after the IRA's historic announcement of its cessation of illegal activity. It transpired later that they were aided by Cork-born Paul Damery, an IRA fugitive on the run for the killing of an Irish police officer, who was at that time in Venezuela and had connections in Cuba. Shortly after arrival in Ireland, the three reported to An Garda Síochána, the Irish police force, of their presence in the country. To date, extradition requests from the Colombian government have been unsuccessful and the three men remain at large in Ireland.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 4.** The three accused men shortly after their arrest (Photo: Truth Monitor).

It is not the purpose of this article to unearth the actual facts in the history of FARC-IRA relations. Rather I propose to analyse the different discourses which can be read between the lines of relevant documents, interviews and media articles.

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to intelligence in his possession, the Irish Minister for Justice, Michael McDowell, divulged that the IRA was to be paid between €20 million and €30 million by FARC for this service. The money had been raised by FARC through the organisation's dealings in the global cocaine trade (*The Irish Times*, 23 January 2006).

## Bring Them Home

The three men in question repeatedly denied the charges made against them. James Monaghan stated that "the charge of training the FARC is a false charge, based on false evidence. The training never happened, and I and my friends are therefore not guilty" (Ruane 2003: 11). Defence lawyer Peter Madden affirmed that "there was no real evidence against them" (6). Furthermore, according to the chairperson of the Bring Them Home campaign, Sinn Féin Member of the Local Assembly, Cairíona Ruane, during their imprisonment Monaghan, McCauley and Connolly had "been subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment, threats to their lives, fears that their food was being poisoned, worry about dangers to their families and friends visiting them" (7). She characterised Colombia as "a country where abuse of human rights is routine, systematic and relentless" and went further to say that "the Colombian military and prosecutor have fabricated a case against these three men" (7).

Although it was published before the ruling by the Appeals Court, a document edited by Ruane, *Colombia: Judge for Yourself*, refers to the same facts and represents a counterbalance to the statements contained in the charges. It includes the declarations of the three accused men to the court in Bogotá, summaries of the process, documents supporting the cause and, of particular interest, statements by the observers. Observers were selected among renowned solicitors and barristers, specialists in international law, human rights experts, legislators, social workers and trade union leaders. The observer reports are in general comprehensive, clear and appear to be technically-sound, though I cannot claim any judicial experience or knowledge of criminal law and procedures. In particular, the reports by Ronan Munro, Natalie Kabasakalian and Shaun Kerrigan are very helpful in understanding the defendants' plea against the charges.

The observers are collectively described in Ruane's document as an "International Delegation" (9, 19, 67) or "brave people from three continents (Australia, Europe, and North America)" (7). Nevertheless, in the context of this article, it is important to remark that they are exclusively from Ireland, the US and Australia. There is a significant lack of observers from other parts of the world, particularly from Spanish-speaking countries, and of observers with experience of the criminal law system in Latin American countries.

Moreover, some of the observers' comments reveal their ignorance of the Colombian situation, and others may be perceived as patronising in relation to local practices. Commenting on the prosecutor's harsh question to a witness for the defence, Seán Crowe, TD for Dublin South West and Sinn Féin's spokesperson on Science and Education and Community Affairs, remarked that "as an Irish Parliamentarian I don't believe that anywhere in the civilised world would this type of insulting behaviour be allowed" (21). Indeed, the *civilised world* mentioned by Seán Crowe does not seem to include Colombia. Finian McGrath, Independent TD in Ireland, rightly alluded to the violent methods of the paramilitary groups that oppose FARC guerrillas, but he demonstrated a particular ideological bias when he asserted that "this is Colombia and anyone left or centre is an 'extremist' or a 'legitimate target' for the death squads" (24). Notwithstanding its clear structure and argumentation, Irish Senator Mary White's report maintained that "political ex-prisoners in such a situation [trying to enter a country without a waiver visa] often consider their lives are in danger from subversive groups in many countries, particularly military and paramilitary groups in South and

Central America" (28). In his concluding remarks, Barry McElduff MLA, member of Sinn Féin's Six County Executive and Chairperson of Sinn Féin in County Tyrone, stated that he had no "real hope that these men could ever receive a fair hearing or any kind of justice in Colombia" (31).

Certain remarks from the observers Patrick Daly, Paul Hill and Pat Fowler are regrettable and do not help to objectively evaluate the defendants' stand. The Irish solicitor Patrick Daly makes comparisons with Ireland, where "justice must be done but also must be seen to be done." This statement seems to be irrelevant in the context of the Colombian judicial system. In this respect, Daly observed that "things often move slowly in Colombia" (36), without any consideration to the different meanings that time may have to diverse cultures. He went on with assessments "by way of comparison" with Ireland or "by international standards" (38), which are in fact limited to Daly's experience in English-speaking countries. Paul Hill, one of the *Guildford Four*,<sup>6</sup> echoed the other observers in stating that "as one who has observed trials in the North of Ireland, England, Scotland, Holland, America (north and south) Australia, I can honestly say I know of no other country where this case would be allowed to proceed." He reinforced his views by pointing to the sequence of witness declarations dictated by the judge, and commented that it "was in my view bizarre and would not be acceptable in any normal jurisdiction" (39). By *normal* he was certainly referring to the courts of which he had experience, reducing in this way the context of his judgement to a few legal systems in the world. The same can be observed in Pat Fowler's report, which is based on what is customary "in most courts" or what is judged by "most people in world" (63); vague statements that are not substantiated.

The issue of language and its cultural consequences is relevant to this analysis. Steve McCabe, a US-based lawyer and member of the Brehon Law Society, complained that "no translation services were provided during the first day of the trial" and he regarded this as "a case of passing the buck and perhaps an effort to preclude the [observers'] Delegation from understanding the nature of the testimony and the proceedings" (41). For his part, in his comprehensive and well-structured report, the Australian lawyer Shaun Kerrigan stated that "after the first real public hearings in December 2002 the Presiding Judge adopted the philosophy that a translator would only be provided by the Colombian Government or was only required to be provided by the Colombian Government when the accused were actually present in Court or the persons giving evidence to the Court's first language was English" (67). Therefore, the observers' delegation had to obtain a translation themselves. Their complaint about the lack of translation services could be seen as a confirmation of their prejudiced attitudes towards a different culture in which the first language is not English. However, taking into account their qualifications, one would think that it is just one of their conditions in providing an accurate and impartial report. Subsidiary to the issue of language is the manner in which some observers spelled the name of the country. This is not a trivial issue given that they wrote their report subsequent to their visit. They should therefore have shown at least a minimum of respect for the country's name, which is misspelled by Des Bonass ("the *Columbian* military", 32) and Ronan Munro ("the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of *Columbia*", 79, my italics). Frequently in the English-speaking world Colombia is incorrectly written as Columbia. Yet one would expect that international

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<sup>6</sup> The *Guildford Four* (Paul Hill, Gerry Conlon, Patrick Armstrong and Carole Richardson) were wrongly convicted in the United Kingdom in October 1975 of the Provisional IRA's Guildford pub bombing which killed five and injured sixty-five people. They served over fifteen years in prison.



observers selected on the basis of their objectivity to report on this trial would be aware of the difference between the Republic of Colombia and Canada's British Columbia or the District of Columbia in the US.

## **Ireland in Colombia - Latin America in Ireland**

In order to obtain first-hand opinions from people interested in the trial of the three Irishmen, I conducted interviews by email with people in Colombia and in Ireland.

Johanna Cortés Conde is a young barrister at the courts of Bogotá. She was not involved in any stage of the judiciary process in relation to the accused Irishmen, though she is acquainted with the opinions prevalent in Colombia concerning the affair. Cortés Conde understands that FARC is connected to other international guerrilla groups, including Sendero Luminoso in Peru, and that they may have links with president Hugo Chávez of neighbouring Venezuela. She expressed the wish that Colombia and Ireland would improve co-operation, and suggested that the peace process in Northern Ireland could serve as a model for Colombia. In Colombia, people know very little about Ireland, and probably for this reason the trial of the three Irish prisoners has been underrepresented in the local media. Therefore, she does not believe that this incident has damaged Ireland's reputation in Colombia. FARC has managed to garner some support in European countries, and is sometimes viewed as an organisation which protects the poor, though in reality - she says - they are mercenaries acting in collusion with drug-trafficking cartels. Corruption in Colombia's judiciary system is more rampant than in most European countries. However, in recent times standards have improved significantly. Since the adoption of the new constitution of 1991, recourse to protection may be called upon in any context by any person, including foreigners. Basic rights like due process are constitutionally guaranteed. In addition, regulatory bodies are accessible to anyone and therefore transparency during the trial is guaranteed.

Alejandra Gonzalez was born in Medellín, a city north-west of Bogotá, and is a PhD student at the National University of Ireland, Galway, where she is involved in research and lecturing at the Centre for Innovation & Structural Change (CISC).<sup>7</sup> She comments that in many countries in Latin America the presence of Irish people was extremely valuable. The Irish Republicans' struggle for a united Ireland has been a source of inspiration for the organisations involved in the often-suppressed socialist movements in Latin America. With regard to alleged connections between FARC and the IRA, Gonzalez believes that the image of Colombia in Ireland was negatively affected by the affair. She considers the "Bring Them Back" [*sic*] campaign to have emphasised Colombia's most serious problems in the eyes of the general public in order to build a strong case for their campaign and to enhance their arguments. Nonetheless, she

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<sup>7</sup> Alejandra Gonzalez's account of the Colombian presence in Ireland is very interesting. The largest group of Colombians is located in Dublin, and she estimates the total number at about 300. Twice a year, Colombian gatherings are organised in Dublin, generally around Christmas and for Colombian Independence Day (July 20th). Also, there is a Colombian Catholic priest in Dublin who says mass in Spanish, and this is well attended by the Colombian community. There are several Colombian women married to Irish men, along with Colombian engineers working in the information technology industry. Gonzalez considers Irish society to be more open than that of Colombia in terms of class, race, religion and sexual orientation, but she complains about the misty, grey and rainy weather of the west of Ireland.

does not think the reputation of Latin America in general has been damaged by the event.

Caitríona Ruane is Sinn Féin's spokesperson on Equality, Human Rights and Women. She is an elected member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for the South Down constituency. She has experience of working in Latin America since 1983 and has chaired the Bring Them Home campaign since 2001. Ruane confirms that Sinn Féin has extensive links with political parties and social movements in Latin America, and points to the relationship between Britain and Ireland, historically that of coloniser and colonised, suggesting that it is therefore qualitatively different to that between Ireland and Latin America. In reference to immigration, Ruane recognises some institutionalised resistance to immigrants expressed in new Irish legislation. However, she claims that Ireland has traditionally been a place which welcomes and assists new arrivals. Regarding the trial of the three Irishmen accused in Colombia, she asserts that only the reputation of the Colombian government, army, police and prison service, along with elements of the judiciary, has been damaged by this episode. From her own experience she has a positive view of the people and the cultures of Colombia, but criticises the abuse of authority by the rich and powerful.

Most likely, the FARC-IRA affair represents one of the lowest points in the Irish relations with Colombia - and perhaps with Latin America - since the massive enrolment of Irish mercenaries almost two centuries ago to fight against Spanish colonial forces in Simón Bolívar's independence armies. In the present-day situation, the immigration controls in place for any visitor to Ireland are far more rigorous in the case of Colombian citizens than those of most other countries. The FARC-IRA affair did not help to ease those measures and did not contribute to facilitating free travel for Colombians. At the Colombian embassy in London I was informed by a spokesperson that owing to this affair the reputation of their country in Ireland has been negatively affected.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, since October 2001, the Irish are the only Europeans who are required to obtain a visa to enter Colombia.

## **News, Facts and Perceptions**

Media reporting of the alleged FARC-IRA connection frequently comes across as a dichotomous discourse in which every player or episode is invariably consigned to one or the other side of a right-wrong divide. As a result of this, an astonishing number of print media and their online pages seem to have opted for one or the other position without further consideration of the numerous complexities of the situation.

One example is in the headlines, which are important in providing a brief summary of the news that follows, and indeed in attracting the audience's attention. The latter aim is often attained by paraphrasing literary texts or works of art - the subtitle of the first section of this article, "Gangs of Colombia", is symptomatic of this trend, playing on the title of the film *Gangs of New York* - or by making an association with a popular historic event. News items relating to the FARC-IRA affair frequently include the title "Colombia Three", thereby establishing an immediate association for Irish, and to a lesser extent UK audiences and readers, with the "Birmingham Six" and the above mentioned "Guildford Four". All of these prisoners were proven to be innocent people framed by various members of the police force in the UK and imprisoned for offences

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<sup>8</sup> The embassy of Colombia in London is responsible for diplomatic relations with the UK and Ireland.

and crimes which they did not commit. I could not access information on how the headline "Colombia Three" originated and became popular among journalists and others writing about this matter, but it is clear that it is not a neutral heading.<sup>9</sup> Another rather clumsy headline used by some print media is "The Colombia Connection" which recalls William Friedkin's film *The French Connection* (1971), inherently linking violence and drug trafficking with the South American country. Likewise, the campaign name "Bring Them Home" mirrors a number of anti-war crusades in the US.



**Figure 5.** Mural at Southway, Brandywell, Derry (Artist unknown, December 2002, Copyright © Dr. Jonathan McCormick).

Elaborating on the information available relating to alleged links between FARC and the IRA would be misleading given the difficulties in locating reliable sources. In my analysis of newspaper sources, I covered the period from August 2001 to January 2006 inclusive, and a variety of national newspapers in Colombia, Ireland and the United Kingdom which offer online websites. Very few of the features published on this matter that I was able to study can be characterised as providing neutral information, the balance being unambiguously against the accused men in the case of the majority of Colombian and British media, and vaguely in favour among their Irish colleagues. Ostensibly, journalists writing these articles did not have recourse to the trial documents and rulings, most notably absent were references to the text of the charges.

Simplify and exaggerate is often the mantra when information is scarce and contradictory, when the subject is difficult to explain to a broad audience, and when prejudices are widely rooted in public opinions. Used by management counsellors, pseudo-scientific strategists, and self-improvement book authors, this recipe is also a favourite among the press and politicians to reduce complex information to simplistic

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<sup>9</sup> Two observers described the affair using the loaded appellation "The Colombia Three", including Niall Andrews, Irish Member of the European Parliament ("the trial of the Colombia Three"), and Des Bonass, Executive of the Dublin Council of Trade Unions ("visit of Columbia [*sic*] Three") (Ruane 2003: 19, 32).

statements that are difficult to dispute. News items on the FARC-IRA affair tend to pigeonhole the three accused men, their lawyers, Sinn Féin and even their country of origin together with the Marxist FARC rebels, Cuban and Venezuelan governments, international terrorist networks, drug-traffickers, warlords and arms dealers in Colombian jungles. Prevalent on the other side of the divide are the US, British, Irish and European governments, in co-operation with the regular Colombian forces, law enforcement organisations combating drug and arms trafficking, the international war on terror, and even paramilitary groups such as AUC.<sup>10</sup>



Another over-simplified taxonomy divides the players in this affair between those belonging to the supposedly civilised world of North America and Europe and representatives of the perceived untamed societies of Latin America. This opposition, redolent of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Traveller's* prejudiced depictions of continental European peoples, is given further contours by the reality of Latin America's Europeanised elites who regard native cultures as backward and barbarous. An appalling example is Mario Vargas Llosa's recent article about successful political movements in Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela, in which the aspirations of the indigenous people are seen by the Peruvian-Spanish author as racist, nationalist and militarist.<sup>11</sup> Even more outdated and entirely useless are "left" and "right" categorisations, which, even acknowledging the use of "centre" and the more nuanced "centre-left" and "centre-right", should be limited to their French Revolution context. Nevertheless, they are employed with staggering frequency to classify people, political movements, media and even entire countries and continents.

How should one approach the analysis of the FARC-IRA affair? In view of these prejudiced categories and descriptions, the likelihood of the publication in our lifetimes

<sup>10</sup> However, the media also reported on the resolution adopted by the European Parliament on violations of human rights in Colombia, particularly the case of Fr. Brendan Forde and his community of La Unión (7 September 2000). This is but one example of official criticism from a governmental body regarding the action of paramilitary groups. In the session of 18 October 2000 of Dáil Éireann (the Irish lower house of parliament), the then Minister for Foreign Affairs Brian Cowen was questioned on this same issue (Vol. 524).

<sup>11</sup> Vargas Llosa, Mario, "De la mano de la 'izquierda boba'. Asoma en la región un nuevo racismo: indios contra blancos" in *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 20 January 2006.

of a complete, accurate and candid account is doubtful to say the least. If the objective is to achieve a simple elucidation of the affair without falling into the trap of creating a new conspiracy theory, perhaps it is only our children, or even grandchildren, who will benefit from the neutrality more easily afforded by a historical perspective. Writing the history of current events is never an easy ride, and it is a task most reviled by historians. Reliable documents are in short supply or difficult to obtain. Factual or in-depth research is often resisted by the actors in the affair, most of whom have a vested interest in the story. When "good" and "evil" are identified, people tend to justify themselves, and their susceptibility is intense.

With these potential pitfalls in mind, instead of trying to ascertain the real facts of the story of the three Irish men in Colombia, I endeavoured to expose some prevalent perceptions that are deeply rooted in the mentalities of the people of Colombia and Ireland. As a rule, according to Tzvetan Todorov, we tend to think in a binary mode, liberal/conservative, idealist/realist, left/right, active/passive, and so on.<sup>12</sup> It is not necessary to reject one or the other term in these oppositions, but rather this very way of conceptualising the problem.

There may be other ways to classify the behaviour of all the players in this puzzling affair. Human beings are morally undefined, good and bad at the same time. Instead of the many manifestations of the opposition between "us" and "them", I propose to use Todorov's qualifying categories - democratic and totalitarian - to regard the events in a different manner. We are all democratic and totalitarian, Latin American and European (and African and Asian), left- and right-wing, moral and wicked. But when we preach as high-priests of morality we do little to ameliorate sectarian divisions. As Renaud says in his other song *La ballade Nord-Irlandaise*: "Ce sont les hommes pas le curés / qui font pousser les orangers".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien: Enquête sur le siècle* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> It is the men not the priests who grow the orange trees. Renaud Séchan, *La ballade Nord-Irlandaise* in "Marchand de caillaux" (1991).

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