

Martin Seeds
No Country For Young Men

Exhibition Presentation at Seen Fifteen
Gallery, London, November 2021

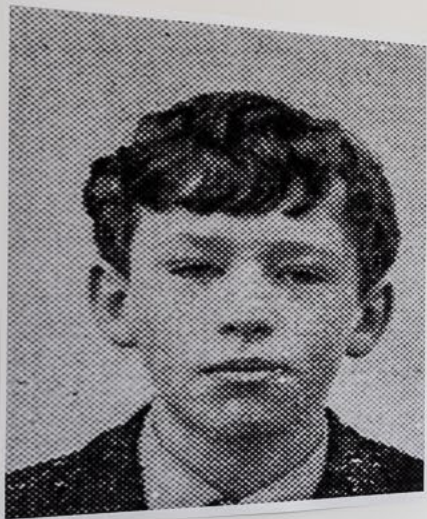






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NO COUNTRY
FOR YOUNG MEN





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History haunts over these young boys like a falling shadow. As they slowly unfurling into the narrow lens, trouble awaits them as surely as night follows day.

For the next three decades, the lives of many of them will be defined, clustered, and in some instances, perhaps curtailed, by the violence that swirls indiscriminately around them.

Photo: [unreadable]





No Country for Young Men publication

"Before the darkness fell"

Sean O'Hagan

Although the boys in these found portraits are strangers to me, they also look eerily and unsettlingly familiar. Had I not been told by the artist, Martin Seeds, that his preferred subjects were Christian Brothers' pupils, I am almost certain I would have guessed it. Their faces call out to me across the years. In them, I see my younger self.

These boys are my contemporaries and I share a formative experience with them: a Christian Brothers grammar school education. Although the CBS secondary school in Armagh never produced a yearbook during the time I was there in the mid-to-late 1960s, the walls of the main corridor were lined with school photographs, which had been taken at regular intervals by a local studio photographer with a panoramic camera. Each group portrait adhered to the same rigidly formal composition: long rows of boys, aged 11 to 16, arranged shoulder-to-shoulder, with the youngest sitting cross-legged at the front. All of them wear a version of the uniform that can be glimpsed in Seeds' intended individual portraits: stiff blazers, nylon shirts and neatly knotted school ties.

More intriguingly, they have the same look about them, an otherness that is difficult to describe. It is not just the callousness of youth, the malleability of narrow and pale, Northern Irish faces, but more a sense of willed compliance that many of them exude as they stare into the lens. It comes, I think, from a shared sense of being part of a select group. The boys that Seeds has rescued from history for his series, *No Country for Young Men*, have not long passed the 11-plus exam and, having done so, earned their places at secondary school. In the wake of this brutally Darwinian selection process, they will have been separated from many of the friends they made at primary school, those that

Brothers' boys and thus somehow elect, set apart from our contemporaries.

These found portraits, enlarged and indistinct, possess an added resonance. They are appropriated from a Belfast school yearbook from 1965, a year of violent tremors in Northern Ireland that, with hindsight, seem darkly prescient. History hangs over these young boys like a falling shadow. As they stare, unknowing, into the camera lens, trouble awaits them as surely as night follows day.

In just a few years time, the world they grew up in will begin to tilt on its axis. In 1968, the Northern Irish Civil Rights movement will begin to make its presence felt in marches and protests against the sectarian status, and the state will respond with batons, rubber bullets and arrests. In 1969 the British Army will be deployed to Northern Ireland after many nights of sectarian violence precedes an assault of several thousand Catholics from Nationalist areas of Belfast as whole streets are raped by Loyalist mobs.

For the next three decades, the lives of many of them will be defined, obscured, and in some instances, perhaps curtailed, by the violence that swirls indiscriminately around them. Closer than backgrounds, some among them all almost certainly go on to embrace the cause of violent Republicanism. Conversely, a select few may follow in the footsteps of their educators, donning the surplice and the soutane to pursue a religious vocation. I surmise this with the knowledge that several boys I knew made those life-altering decisions, though many more choose the gun than the cross. Both, it seems me now, were, in their different ways, escape routes from the turbulent temporal corridors of adolescence. Both involved

persuasive adults driven by absolute certitudes recruiting vulnerable young men to a single transformative ideal. No country for young men, indeed.

In all of this, I am conscious that, for me, the unsettling power of these portraits resides to a great degree in what I bring to them: the memories they inevitably evoke and the feelings they awaken within me. For me, they are intensely personal images despite the fact that I do not know the subjects. What matters is that, regardless, they, resonate.

In *Corner Linnis*, Roland Barthes famously identified the photographic "punctum": the accidental detail within an image that can provoke an intensely personal response from a viewer. For me, these portraits are all punctum: the familiar expressions, the makeshift handsets, the grips of fact shirt collars, knotted school ties and blazer lapels. It is this constellation of incidental but telling details that prick and trouble me.

Anyone with a different upbringing, borne of course, may not find these portraits so poignant, so infused with melancholy and memory. Their poignancy is inextricably linked to a time and place, a particular moment in Northern Irish history, before the darkness fell. For Barthes, a photographic portrait's essential implied message is a brutally cruel one: "That has been." That sense of time, irrevocably past and youth irretrievably gone is certainly palpable in these recovered portraits but, for me, what is even more haunting about them is the haunting question: What will be? What will become of these boys, their youth and their fragile aspirations, as the shadows of history fall across their lives? It is not just the past that is hauntingly present in these humble portraits, but the coming, uncertain, tumultuous future.

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Sean O'Hagan

No Country for Young Men, 2020

Available as a 36 page broadsheet newspaper with 13 images and 4 essays authored by Dr Edwin Coomasaru, Orla Fitzpatrick, Sean O'Hagan, and Fearghus Roulston.

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Fearghus Roulston.



Contributors

Sean O'Hagan is the photography critic for the Guardian and a feature writer on arts and culture for the Observer.

Dr Edwin Coomasaru is an Associate Lecturer at The Courtauld Institute of Art, where he was awarded his AHRC-funded PhD on Northern Irish masculinity and the legacy of the 'Troubles' in visual culture. He also held the 2018-19 Sackler Postdoctoral Fellowship at The Courtauld, and recently contributed to the Barbican's 'Masculinities: Liberation through Photography' (2020) exhibition catalogue.

Orla Fitzpatrick is a librarian and photo-historian from Dublin.

Feargus Roulston is an oral historian, currently working at the University of Brighton on a interview-based history of migration from Northern Ireland to Britain. His first book, an oral history of the punk scene in Belfast, is coming out on Manchester University Press in 2021.

Martin Seeds is an artist from Northern Ireland. In 2019 he was nominated for the 2020 Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for his solo exhibition *Violence Religion Injustice Death at Seen Fifteen* Gallery, London. In 2018 he was awarded the Danny Wilson Memorial Award Professionals Choice for the best solo exhibition at Brighton Photo Fringe. In 2017 he received a Magnum Graduate Award for his body of work titled *Assembly*.

Thank you

Joan Alexander
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Vivienne Gamble
James William Murray

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For Martha

No Country for Young Men: a selection of the original found source imagery

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