

## Biography

Robin Percival is a political activist and retired college lecturer who lives in Derry, Ireland. He was born in October 1947 at Highfield Road Maternity Hospital, in Widnes, Lancashire: a smelly industrial town, largely involved in the production of chemicals, just 12 miles along the River Mersey from the centre of Liverpool. Robin's mother was Norah Phillips (1916-1985) from Bredwardine in Herefordshire. She was a primary school teacher. Robin's father was George E Percival (1914-1999), a pork butcher in the Cheshire town of Runcorn.

Norah and George had met in 1934 when Norah was engaged on her teaching practice in Runcorn and they were married at St. Paul's Methodist Church, Runcorn in 1941.

Robin has an elder brother, Michael Percival, who was born in 1944.

Robin's education began at Fairfield Infants School (where his mother was a teacher and later Deputy Headmistress) and Farnworth Church of England Primary School, Widnes.

In 1958 he was sent to Prior's Court Preparatory School in Chieveley, near Newbury<sup>1</sup> before moving in 1960 to the senior school, Kingswood School in Bath. Kingswood had been established in 1748 by Rev. John Wesley as a Methodist foundation.

Robin left Kingswood at the end of 1965 with an undistinguished set of O and A Levels (History, English, Divinity) and worked for several months as a gravedigger in Widnes Cemetery, just across the road from the family house in Birchfield Road.

While at school, Robin has joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a Christian pacifist organisation which had been established in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War. Robin was elected to its Youth Committee.

In 1966 Robin began to train as a local preacher within the Widnes Methodist Church. Despite some issues he had with the "distinctive" doctrines of Methodism, he became a fully accredited local preacher in 1970 and was an active preacher until he came to Ireland in 1972. He felt uncomfortable with the ethos of Irish Protestantism and eventually left the Methodist Church. He was a founder attendee at the Bishop Street Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. He was later to describe himself as an independent Quaker following his rejection for membership by Lisburn Quartely Meeting due to political beliefs.

In the summer of 1966, Robin made his first visit to Ireland. He and two friends<sup>2</sup> camped for three weeks in a field in Dunmore East, near Waterford, Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of Robin's stay at Prior's Court see, "Ratty Goes to School", a Long Read on this website.

<sup>2</sup> James Monahan and Dai Davies

In October 1966 Robin went up to St. Peter's College, Oxford where he read Philosophy, Politics and Economics, gaining an undivided second class honours degree in 1969.

While at Oxford, Robin heard the newly elected Republican Labour MP for West Belfast, Gerry Fitt and his attention turned to Ireland. At Easter, 1968, Robin travelled to Belfast, Northern Ireland, to explore the nature of the political problems there.

He proposed a project to the Youth Committee of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. This became the basis of the first of a series of summer workcamps organised by the FoR. The first, in 1969, was in Derry, Northern Ireland.

After Oxford, Robin's first job was as a youth officer of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Though he continued to live at home, the focus of his work was centred on Liverpool. He established the A Liverpool Nonviolent Action Group (ALNAG).

Subsequently Robin worked for four months as a factory worker at Turner & Newall, an asbestos making factory about a mile from his home in Widnes.

In 1971 he obtained a scholarship to the Quaker college Pendle Hill near Philadelphia in the USA. He went in January 1971, returning in August. Robin studied nonviolent action at Pendle Hill. During his time there he was arrested during an anti-Vietnam war demonstration outside the White House in Washington, D.C. A picture of his arrest appeared on the front page of *The New York Times*. He also worked in support of the lettuce boycott organised by Farm Workers Union led by Cesar Chavez. He travelled with four others to watch the annual Mardi Gras in New Orleans. He spent two weeks living with David McReynold's in his apartment in the Bowery, New York. David was the left wing Field Officer of the War Resisters' League and subsequently a candidate for the Socialist Party for the US presidency. When his time at Pendle Hill finished he travelled across the United States with his friend Rick Woods to Los Angeles. A lack of money forced him to return home which involved Robin hitching rides from Los Angeles to Philadelphia, via Sacramento and Denver, Colorado.

On returning to England, Robin took up an appointment as a Research Officer with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. The purpose of the research was to explore the possible development of a nonviolent peacekeeping force which could be used in Northern Ireland as an alternative to the British Army. One week before Bloody Sunday (30<sup>th</sup> January 1972), Robin met with Martin McGuinness for the first time. Martin, who came with another IRA leader (probably James "Ducksie" Doherty), was introduced as the O/C of the Derry Brigade<sup>3</sup>. In what was to mark the beginning of the end of his relationship with the FoR, in January 1972 he took up the post of News Editor of *Peace News*, a London based international pacifist paper.

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<sup>3</sup> At the Saville Inquiry, Martin said that he was in fact the Brigade's adjutant.

During his time at *Peace News*, where he worked alongside another Kingswood boy, Howard Clark, he developed the paper's interest in the Welsh Language movement and the campaign amongst prisoners for prison reform as well as the conflict in Northern Ireland.

In the autumn of 1972, he left his post at *Peace News* and moved to live in Derry with two friends: John Thorn and Jerry Tyrrell. In subsequent years they were joined by George Biniek from California, USA and Hilary Sidwell from Macclesfield, England. This was an attempt to develop a communal style of living, to which they gave the name *Forderry House*.

Other members of Forderry House included, briefly, US activists, Lynne Shivers and Jackie Shirn.

The group also wanted to grow support for nonviolence within Ireland. They published a monthly magazine, *A Clear Day*. This was later transformed into *Dawn, an Irish Journal of Nonviolence*, which was edited by a wider group.

Hilary and Robin were to develop a close long term relationship and partnership which still continues to this day.

Much of the work which John, Jerry, Robin, Hilary and George undertook was organising regular play activity for the children of the Brandywell. It was at this time that Robin first met Tony Doherty, the 11 year old son of one of the men murdered on Bloody Sunday in January 1972<sup>4</sup>. Another boy who became a friend was David Barbour (1961-2020).

For a time, Robin was Secretary of the newly formed FoR in Ireland but his period ended when a consultation he was organising about the use of the British Army in Northern Ireland was cancelled.

Robin also became an elected member of the Bogside Community Association and acted as Secretary of the Association.

He was also a founding member of Community Organisations Northern Ireland, a federation of community organisations.

In 1973, Robin was one of a small group of activists who had established the British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland Campaign (BWNIC). 14 members of BWNIC were subsequently arrested and charged under the Incitement to Disaffection Act. They had distributed leaflets urging serving British soldiers not to go to Northern Ireland. As an act of solidarity, the day the 14 went on trial in 1975, Robin with three others (George Biniek, Justin Morahan and Peter Tyndal) distributed the offending leaflet amongst British soldiers on the streets of Derry. This action,

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Doherty has authored three books about growing up in Derry, his time as an IRA volunteer and prisoner, plus his work with the Bloody Sunday Justice Campaign. Published by Mercier, they are entitled, *This Man's Wee Boy* (2016), *The Dead Beside Us* (2017) and *The Skelper and Me* (2019).

shown on the BBC news that night, including an interview with Martin Bell, led to Robin being interviewed by the RUC. However no prosecution followed following the acquittal of the 14 in London.

In 1974, Robin was appointed to a Research Fellowship at the New University of Ulster in Coleraine funded by the Social Science Research Council. The purpose of the Fellowship was to explore the feasibility of social science research in Northern Ireland against a background of conflict and intimidation. Robin did two studies of community groups in the North, one in Loyalist south Belfast, Finaghy, and one in Derry, the Bogside Community Association. This research, which was published by the Department of Social Administration at NUU in 1975, was entitled *Community Action and Community Perceptions of the Social Services in Northern Ireland: The Report of a Feasibility Study*.

In 1977 Robin convened the small group in Derry which established Bookworm, a locally owned co-operative bookshop in Derry. For a time this was the only bookshop in Derry. It closed in the 2000s.

In 1977 Robin began his long term association with what is now the North West Regional College<sup>5</sup>, the Tech, when he was appointed as a part time lecturer in sociology in the Arts and General Studies Department. He taught O Level sociology. When the following year, Hilary Sidwell resigned her post as Lecturer in Sociology and Social Policy, Robin applied for the post and was appointed.

Robin was to remain at the North West Regional College until his retirement in 2006. At the college he was elected a Staff Governor twice in 1980 and 1985. After two terms he stood down. He was also elected to the college's Academic Board. He was active in the college lecturers union, NATFHE (now UCU), serving on the Branch Committee as Branch Secretary, Membership Secretary and Branch Chair. As a representative of the branch on the Northern Ireland Region, he was elected Chairman of the Northern Ireland Region of NATFHE in 1986, taking up his post in 1987.

Robin represented the branch on the Derry Trades Union Council for approximately 21 years. He was elected Chair of the Council in 1990.

In 1990 he was appointed Senior Lecturer in the new department of Caring Services. In 1996 he began a three year part-time MSc in Educational Computing at the Ulster University. He finished in 1999 with a distinction. In 2001 he was appointed Head of the Department of Technology following a major re-organisation of the college/institute. During his time as Head

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<sup>5</sup> The college underwent a number of name changes. In 1977 it was the Londonderry College of Technology, then the North West College of Technology (which included the former college in Strabane). Later it became the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education (NWIFHE) before finally becoming the North West Regional College in 2007 following the merger with Limavady College.)

of Department, his department was awarded two Centres of Excellence by the Department of Education, the first by any college West of the Bann. One was in Computing Science, the other was in the Built Environment.

When the government announced in 1983 the formation of the University of Ulster by merging the New University of Ulster with the Ulster Polytechnic, Robin was invited by the Governing Body of the NWRC to chair a subcommittee of the Academic Board of the college to prepare the college's response to the opportunities opened by the merger. Whilst it made a number of recommendations which were accepted by the college and by the Western Education and Library Board, its controversial recommendation of merging the college with Magee College to form an independent university was rejected.

Robin was one of the most innovative members of the teaching staff at the college. As Senior Lecturer in the Caring Services Department he initiated and led the team which designed the first HND in Social Care in Northern Ireland. It was so successful in its first year of student recruitment that the Department of Education introduced a capping scheme for F and H E colleges in the North the following year. He also wrote the sociology inputs for the new Certificate in Social Services and subsequently the Diploma in Social Work. For a time he was an External Verifier in Social Care for Edexcel. He was also a member of the Edexcel team which designed the UK wide HND in Social Care. Robin served on a Northern Ireland wide working group preparing the 16 further education colleges for "incorporation". He was also appointed by the Department of Education to lead a curriculum development group in social care. He was also NATFHE's representative on a working group exploring sectarianism and racism within Northern Ireland's FE colleges.

Robin's fight for proper recognition of the work of college lecturers resulted in him facing a disciplinary hearing in 2005 for "gross misconduct" initiated by the then College Principal. He was given a final written warning by the Chair of the Governing Body.

Robin left the college, with an enhanced pension, in May 2006.

Robin was active in the H Block campaign in Derry and when the hunger strike ended he joined the Sinn Féin Trade Union Department of which he was later elected the Head. His decision to do this and later to join Sinn Féin as a political party was motivated by his conviction, crystallised by the Hunger Strikes, that the British presence in Ireland actually mitigated against peace and reconciliation and fostered sectarianism. He also believed that a strong and effective Sinn Féin was a prerequisite for an end to the IRA's armed struggle.

He was elected Secretary of Derry Sinn Féin's Comhairle Ceantair (Executive Committee) in 1988. He began a process of developing the political profile of the party. In 1988 he was SF's Director of Elections in Derry and the following year in 1989 he established with other activists, such as Tony Doherty, the independent Bloody Sunday Initiative which was tasked with developing a campaign around the lack of justice for those killed and injured on Bloody Sunday.

This led to the complete revamping of the Bloody Sunday weekend in Derry, including a major commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday in 1992 and the formation of the family led Bloody Sunday Justice Campaign.<sup>6</sup> The BSI took the decision to change its name to the Pat Finucane Centre, an organisation in which Robin subsequently held the offices of both Secretary and Chair.

In 1988 Robin was asked by the national leadership of Sinn Féin to join a small group tasked with reviewing SF's overall strategy in the North. He drafted a paper entitled "Developing the peace process" which became the groups submission and which was endorsed by the leadership of Sinn Féin. Other members of the group included a senior national officer of SF, a former councillor in Belfast and Pat McGeown, a former Hunger Striker and one time o/c of the Belfast Brigade of the IRA<sup>7</sup>.

In 1994 Robin left Sinn Féin to devote more time to developing the work of the Pat Finucane Centre and the Bloody Sunday Justice Campaign.

Robin was one of two people, the other being Bernadette McAliskey, who had his voice dubbed by the Broadcasting authorities when he participated in a programme discussing the emerging peace process, even though he had left Sinn Féin by that time.

In 1995 Robin was elected the Secretary of the newly formed Bogside Residents' Group in Derry. The issue of Orange and Loyal Order parades was creating serious unrest throughout the North. In Derry the annual Apprentice Boys' Parade, the largest Loyal Order parade in Ireland, had been allowed to march without conditions on the cityside of Derry for the first time since 1969. This included a parade around those parts of the city walls which overlooked the Bogside. Initially the Apprentice Boys refused to engage in any way with the BRG which led to sit down protests and substantial rioting within the city. Eventually the Apprentice Boys' agreed to meet with the BRG under the chairmanship of John Hume, the local MP, who was later to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Robin was one of the three negotiators appointed to represent the BRG. Though these first conversations were not successful, they established a precedent which culminated in 2001 with the first formal agreement between the BRG and the Apprentice Boys which allowed for an uncontested Apprentice Boys parade in the city. The BRG was subsequently to arrive at agreements with both the Orange Order and Royal Black Preceptory, the first of their kind anywhere in Northern Ireland. These agreements ended the issue of contested parades in Derry and came to be known as the "Derry Model".

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<sup>6</sup> An account of the history of the Bloody Sunday campaign is recorded in Julieann Campbell's 2013 award winning book, *Setting the Truth Free: The Inside Story of the Bloody Sunday Justice Campaign*.

<sup>7</sup> Pat McGeown, then a SF councillor in Belfast, died in 1996.

In 2010, Robin was appointed to the Northern Ireland Parades Commission by then then Secretary of State, Owen Patterson. He served on the Commission for the next three years, along with six other commissioners.

In 1997 Robin was elected the inaugural Chair of the Bloody Sunday Trust. The Trust was established to provide support for the families of those murdered on Bloody Sunday during the duration of the Saville Inquiry which had been established by Tony Blair that year. The Trust commissioned Professor Dermott Walsh of Limerick University to review all the new and available evidence which was in the public domain about Bloody Sunday since the Widgery Tribunal reported in 1972. This became the basis of a submission to the Irish Government who in turn presented it to the British Government as part of their case for a new inquiry<sup>8</sup>. The British Government established a new inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday under the chairmanship of Lord Saville.

During the Saville Inquiry, the Bloody Sunday Trust appointed two Family Liaison Officers and provided a range of support services, primarily to the families of those killed on Bloody Sunday and the wounded, but also to civilian witnesses giving evidence.

Robin was Chair of the Trust when it took the decision to establish the Museum of Free Derry, an award winning museum located in the Bogside which tells the story of the civil rights movement in Derry, the period known as Free Derry, Bloody Sunday and Operation Motorman, ie 1968-1972. The Museum also contains the story of the Bloody Sunday Justice Campaign. Robin was the Chair (for a second time) when the Museum was official opened in 2017 by the Rev Jesse Jackson, the US civil rights leader and friend and confidant of Martin Luther King. Robin had spoken at commemorative events in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 2016 as part of the celebrations of the historic decision to integrate schools in the state of Arkansas in 1956 and which led President Eisenhower to send in troops to enforce integration.

For a time Robin was Chair of Cúnamh, a mental health project established to provide support for people impacted by the conflict, including former combatants and ex-prisoners and their families. He was also for a period Secretary of the Derry Film and Video Collective which produced award winning films such as the initially banned *Mother Ireland* and *Hush-a-bye-Baby*.

Following his retirement from the North West Regional College in 2006, Robin began to travel widely, including to India (an annual visit), China and Iran.

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<sup>8</sup> This submission became the basis of Dermott Walsh's book (2000), *Bloody Sunday and the Rule of Law in Northern Ireland* published by St Martin's Press.