

Christian juxtapositions: Peace in Northern Ireland

reviewed by [Steven Schroeder](#) in the [July 28, 1999](#) issue

The Vision of Peace: Faith and Hope in Northern Ireland.

By Mareid Corrigan Maguire. Orbis, 123 pp.

People Behind the Peace: Community and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

By Ronald A Wells. Eerdmans, 128 pp.

Activist Mareid Corrigan Maguire's gathering of stories, letters, meditations and other occasional pieces is a fitting representation of her work. She is one of the founders of Northern Ireland's Peace People and co-recipient of the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize. Northern Ireland's "troubles" were made violently personal for Maguire through the deaths of her two nephews and a niece in August 1976. The story of those deaths and the injury of her sister Anne, which Maguire recounts in the material gathered in this book, is an appropriate lens for viewing Ireland's troubled relationship with Britain. When a British army patrol shot and killed a 19-year-old IRA volunteer, his car crashed into a sidewalk in Belfast, killing Anne's children and leaving her seriously injured. Anne, who never recovered from the loss of her children, took her own life in January 1980.

These deaths spurred Maguire, Betty Williams and Ciaran McKeown to mobilize massive peace demonstrations and to begin building the community known as the Peace People. The serious day-to-day work of building community—the "ordinary" work of housekeeping celebrated as extraordinary by Desmond Tutu in his foreword to the book—is central to Maguire's vision of peace. Though Maguire's eye ranges from Northern Ireland, to Burma, to Japan, to East Timor, to Phil Berrigan's prison cell in Virginia, she stays close to her vision of a beloved community in which justice and peace embrace.

Maguire takes to heart Thomas Merton's warning that too much emphasis on results can lead to despair and paralysis: "In the end," Merton wrote, "it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything." Maguire's passionate attention to those relationships informs her work. She keeps thinking, she says, of John Henry

Newman's insight: "In a higher world, it is otherwise, but here below, to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often." Despite the 1998 Good Friday peace accord, there is as yet no sure peace in Northern Ireland. But there is hope, centered in the work of living communities.

Living communities are central to Ronald Wells's book. At its heart are the stories of three intentional communities—Corrymeela, the Christian Renewal Center and the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation. However, the accounts of these communities are disappointingly short. Wells devotes a comparatively large part of his brief book to a history of the "troubles" and to a discussion of forgiveness based on Donald Shriver's *An Ethic for Enemies* (Oxford University Press, 1995). Though this history will be helpful for those unfamiliar with the conflict, most will find Maguire's intensely personal account more rewarding.

Wells also draws deeply on Hannah Arendt, who confronted "the predicament of irreversibility" hammered home by the horrible events of the 20th century. We have long memories for the unforgivable wrongs inflicted on us and on others. Yet we must forgive those wrongs if we are to achieve just and peaceful societies—as Maguire's eloquent personal testimony makes clear.

See also [Christian juxtapositions: Holy Things and Holy People](#) and [Christian juxtapositions: How We Became Posthuman](#).