Secrets From Belfast

How Boston College's oral history of the Troubles fell victim to an international murder investigation.

Anthony McIntyre made one thing clear: The project had to remain absolutely secret. If Boston College wanted him to interview former members of the Irish Republican Army, he needed that guarantee. They would be talking about dangerous things—bombings, shootings, and murder.

It was June of 2000, just two years after a controversial peace accord ended three decades of conflict in Northern Ireland. Mr. McIntyre, an independent historian, was having dinner at Deanes Restaurant, in the center of this small, working-class city, with an Irish journalist and a librarian from Boston College.
The journalist, Ed Moloney, was a friend who had recommended Mr. McIntyre for the project. But the librarian, Robert K. O'Neill, was a stranger. And Mr. McIntyre needed to know what sorts of promises he and Boston College were willing to make. The IRA was an unforgiving organization. Although the fighting was over, informers--or "touts," as the IRA called them--were not looked upon kindly. You just didn't go around talking about what you had done in those dark years.

Yet the idea was undeniably appealing. To record the stories of the men and women who had put their lives on the line for the cause of independence, some of whom had committed horrific acts of violence in the process, that was something no one else had done. The three men at the table understood the insights that could be gained, Mr. McIntyre perhaps most of all. He was a former IRA man, and had spent nearly 17 years in prison for killing a loyalist paramilitary soldier. That's why Mr. Moloney wanted him for this job: His fellow fighters would trust him.

"No matter how skilled or experienced the academic researcher or journalist," Mr. Moloney wrote in a proposal two months before the meeting, "ex-paramilitaries know far more about the subject and are familiar with the lifestyles of ex-colleagues in a way others cannot even approach."

The project's four organizers (top to bottom): Thomas Hachey, Boston College's head of Irish programs; Ed Moloney, project director and journalist; Anthony McIntyre, project interviewer, historian, and former IRA member; and Robert O'Neill, head of the Burns Library at BC.

Mr. O'Neill, head of the John J. Burns Library of Rare Books and Special Collections at Boston College, might have seemed a surprising partner in such a risky venture. His was a world of manuscripts and manicured campuses. But he also had extensive connections in Ireland, traveling in both the north and the south to develop one of the most comprehensive collections of Irish literature and history in the world. Now, with peace in the air, he was looking to fill a gap in the Burns Library, focusing on the recent political history of Northern Ireland. When Mr. Moloney, Northern Ireland editor for The Sunday Tribune, heard of the librarian's interest, he proposed an archive collecting the stories of former paramilitary members at "the cutting edge of the conflict."

Thirteen years later the three men would have vastly different recollections of their first meeting. The two Irishmen walked away from dinner thinking that Mr. O'Neill would not pursue the project unless he could assure them that its secrecy was legally protected. Mr. O'Neill insists he would never have made such a blanket promise.

But all agree on one point. In those heady, early days, when talk of reconciliation dominated public discussion in Northern Ireland, none of them imagined their project would get caught up in an international criminal investigation into a four-decade-old murder. How that happened is a tale of grand ambitions undermined by insular decision-making and careless oversight.

The Belfast Project, as it came to be known, was unique in focus and design. But it is one of a growing number of oral histories undertaken at colleges across the United States. The field has expanded and professionalized in recent decades and now claims its own association, with about
900 members, along with several degree-granting programs. Its popularity is driven by the interest among contemporary historians in the lives of ordinary people and also by digital advances. Simply put, it has become much easier to conduct oral histories and to disseminate them.

The attractions of the Belfast Project to Boston College lay not only in the vogue of oral history but also in the college's deep ties to Ireland. An Irish-American success story, BC has risen from a modest 19th-century college, founded to educate the children of poor Irish immigrants, into a prestigious institution with an endowment of nearly $2-billion. It has proudly maintained its connections to Ireland through its Irish collection at the Burns Library, its Irish-studies program, and its Irish Institute, which attempts to promote reconciliation in Ireland and Northern Ireland through professional-development programs.

So it was not surprising when, in the spring of 2000, a visiting scholar from Queen's University Belfast, Paul Bew, suggested to Mr. O'Neill that he consider documenting the recent history of Northern Ireland. Mr. Bew recommended Mr. Moloney, an intense and seemingly fearless journalist who was not averse to risky projects. Having spent decades getting to know people on both sides of the conflict, he was in the process of writing A Secret History of the IRA, a behind-the-scenes look at how the organization had shifted from the gun to the ballot box in its quest for influence.

To get the stories of the veterans, Mr. Moloney suggested Mr. McIntyre, who had earned a doctorate in political science, with a focus on the Republican movement, from Queen's University Belfast after he was released from prison. The two had met in 1993 at a funeral for a young IRA member who had blown himself up in a fish shop in what came to be known as the Shankill Road bombing.

Thomas E. Hachey, Boston College's newly hired executive director of the Center for Irish Programs and a historian of modern Ireland, became the fourth member of the organizing group. Over time he secured $200,000 for the project--about four-fifths of its estimated cost--from Thomas J. Tracy, an Irish-American businessman who was active in both American and Northern Irish politics.

After their evening in Belfast, Mr. McIntyre, Mr. Moloney, and Mr. O'Neill spent several months hashing out the details of the project and drawing up contracts. All acknowledge that their concerns about secrecy at the time stemmed not from a fear of potential criminal investigations but from possible retribution by the IRA.

"It was a prime concern that the interviewee would say nothing about his or her participation in the project," recalls Mr. O'Neill. "I didn't even allow any staff members to have any involvement. We wanted to keep this to the participants and the interviewers and the project director and me and Tom Hachey."

In what was to become the most contested wording in the subsequent falling out between the researchers and the college, Mr. Moloney's contract as project director, which he signed in January 2001, stated that each person interviewed was to be given a contract "guaranteeing to the
extent American law allows the conditions of the interview and the conditions of its deposit" at Boston College. The document did not specify what those conditions might be.

The essence of the arrangement, as laid out in the subsequent agreement for participants, was that each interview would be sealed until the death of the interviewee. No lawyers vetted the wording, and no one at Boston College other than Mr. O'Neill and Mr. Hachey reviewed Mr. Moloney's contract or the one drawn up for interviewees.

There was also apparently no discussion of whether Boston College faculty members should direct the project. Mr. Hachey says he didn't feel anyone on the campus had the necessary expertise. Although a number of faculty members studied Irish culture, history, and literature, he says, "I was looking for someone who was an unequivocal expert" on modern-day Northern Ireland. He relied on the advice of Mr. Bew, who not only had recommended Mr. Moloney but also had been Mr. McIntyre's adviser at Queen's.

Mr. Hachey also didn't see the project as a traditional work of scholarship. "What we intended was a recording of people's memories at the time from both communities," he says. "The intent was to preserve these for other generations to profit from it, through a study of the phenomenology of sectarian violence. I don't think any pretense was made by any of us at the time that this was going to be following the template for official oral history."

Yet Mr. Moloney's contract contained one other requirement: An oversight committee was to be formed "to assure that the strictest standards of historical documentation are to be followed." At a minimum, Mr. Hachey, Mr. O'Neill, and the head of the Irish-studies program were to be members.

Armed with a tape recorder and his intimate knowledge of the IRA, Anthony McIntyre began conducting interviews in the spring of 2001.

It was a full-time job, one he did for nearly six years in relative secrecy. "We were tight about it," he recalls in his thick Belfast accent. "I would approach people who I was absolutely certain, as far as one could be, that they wouldn't run blabbering about it to the IRA and expose the whole project."

At the time, he was living in Belfast, which remains divided along religious lines to this day. The worst of the fighting took place here: working-class Roman Catholics in favor of a united Ireland against working-class Protestants who wanted to remain citizens of Britain. Pipe bombs placed under cars, masked gunmen entering shops, army tanks rolling through the streets--the terror was close, and the toll was intimately felt. Families lost brothers, mothers, and children. In all, more than 3,500 people died.

Mr. McIntyre, who first went to prison at 16, one in a long line of young men who believed in the rightness of political violence, knew these streets well. He met people at their homes or other safe places, his tape recorder tucked away in a bag. Sometimes he would travel to other towns where former IRA members lived. If they asked him out for a pint afterward, he says, he kept his bag wrapped closely around his chest.
"I was nervous without being shaky," he recalls. "If I was doing an interview 100 or 200 miles
away, I couldn't rest until I got back to the house."

Gregarious, erudite, and often profane, Mr. McIntyre most likely put others at ease because he is
at ease with himself. He does not hide his past: A memorial sculpture, given to him by fellow
prisoners upon his release, sits proudly on a bookshelf in his home. But he also speaks fluidly
about his disillusionment with the IRA's Marxist trappings, his youthful faith in the cause, and
the danger of judging people's actions in war through the prism of peace. His bookshelves are
packed with works by or about Marx, Chomsky, Guevara, Indira Gandhi, and Stalin.

He left the movement after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, in 1998.

"We rose up to right a wrong," he says, reflecting on the life of the Provisional IRA, as the
modern-day organization is known. "And in the course of righting that wrong we violated too
many rights ourselves."

Many of the people he interviewed had also fallen out with the organization and saw the power-
sharing arrangement as the death of their cause, with Gerry Adams, president of the IRA's
political counterpart, Sinn Fein, as its architect. Mr. McIntyre did interview some who viewed
the peace process in a more positive light, but he says if he had approached former leaders of the
IRA or Sinn Fein, they would have tried to shut down the project.

"I could not afford having people going back to Gerry Adams or the IRA and saying, 'This is
what he's doing,'" Mr. McIntyre says. "That would have exposed us all to risk."

After each interview he had the recordings transcribed. Then he sent the transcripts, without the
interviewee's name attached, by encrypted email to Mr. Moloney, who had moved to New York
soon after the project began. Mr. Moloney gave him directions for follow-up interviews: Ask
this, double-check that, dig deeper there. It was not unusual for Mr. McIntyre to spend 10 or
more hours with one person. Before he turned on his tape recorder, he asked people to think
carefully about what they would like to talk about and what they'd prefer not to discuss.

He kept no recordings or transcripts in his home any longer than he had to. He sent them by mail
to Mr. O'Neill, who put them under lock and key in Boston College's Burns Library. The
contracts with interviewees--known as "donor contracts" and containing the code to identify the
anonymized tapes--were hand-delivered to Mr. O'Neill during his trips to Belfast.

The project expanded during its early years to include interviews with members of the Ulster
Volunteer Force, a loyalist paramilitary group. A Belfast-based researcher with connections in
that community conducted those interviews. By the time the project ended, in 2006, it included
interviews with 20 loyalists.

For his part, Mr. McIntyre interviewed 26 people. He knew some of them quite well. Dolours
Price, who helped plant a series of bombs in London in 1973, was godmother to his son. Brendan
Hughes, mastermind of some of the bloodiest IRA attacks in Belfast, gave away Mr. McIntyre's
wife, Carrie Twomey, at their wedding.
The interviews proved cathartic for many. "Sometimes," recalls Mr. McIntyre, "it was hard to get them started. And then it was harder to get them to stop."

People revealed information about the inner workings of the IRA and shed new light on infamous events.

Richard O'Rawe, now gray-haired, told Mr. McIntyre about secret negotiations behind a prison hunger strike during the 1980s in which 10 people died. Haunted by the belief that IRA leaders could have prevented some of those deaths, Mr. O'Rawe says he never would have told his story to anyone but Mackers, as he calls him. Both had been on "the blanket," protesting their treatment as ordinary criminals rather than political prisoners by refusing to wear prison uniforms. "I needed to know the guy I was telling this to could be trusted one billion percent," he says.

Mr. Hughes gave a detailed account of the activities of the IRA's Belfast Brigade, of which he was a leader, including its role in the murder of Jean McConville. In December 1972 gunmen abducted the mother of 10 from her apartment in front of her children. Ms. McConville was never seen alive again. Mr. Hughes, who monitored the slum known as Divis Flats, where the McConville family lived, said she had been revealed as an informer for the British Army, was ordered killed, and her body buried. That order, he said, had come from Gerry Adams, his commanding officer.

Mr. Adams, who now serves as a Sinn Fein representative in the Irish parliament, has said Mr. Hughes's accusation was a lie. Indeed, he has always denied he was a member of the IRA, to the disgust of his former friend. Mr. Hughes had once thought of him as a brother.

During his interviews, living alone and struggling with ill health and depression, Mr. Hughes reflected bitterly on his life's work. He had been beaten and imprisoned, had nearly died in a hunger strike, and had committed horrific acts of violence. And for what? The British had succeeded, he said, "in turning a revolutionary movement into a conservative organization."

"As everything has turned out," he told Mr. McIntyre, "not one death was worth it."

Mr. Hughes decided that he wanted to tell the world what he knew. But Mr. McIntyre warned him against it. The IRA might hunt him down. Equally important, the whole Boston College project might be revealed, endangering many others while interviews were still being conducted.

So they struck a deal: Someday, Mr. McIntyre would make sure his story got told.

What obligations do oral historians and their colleges have if someone reveals sensitive information--perhaps even a crime--during an interview? Who is allowed to hear the tapes and when? Do interviewees understand what might happen to their stories once they speak into the microphone?

"The issues that this case represents are issues we deal with constantly," says Mary Marshall Clark, director of Columbia University's Center for Oral History Research, home of one of the
largest archives of recorded histories in the world. "We're ethically bound as historians," she says, "that the people we interview know what will happen to their material and what could happen."

Some universities have concluded that oral-history projects should be subject to review by institutional review boards, or IRBs, in the same way as scientific research on human subjects, a view that troubles oral historians. (Boston College now requires IRB review if oral-history archives are to be made public, but the Belfast Project began before those protocols were in place.) The historians say that interviews don't raise the same ethical questions as medical research and would be overly confined by the protocols, such as vetting questions in advance.

Still, oral history is fraught with its own challenges, which is why Ms. Clark believes scholars must carefully research and consider all of the potential risks, both ethical and legal, before embarking on a project.

"I tend to avoid talking about criminal activity where there's still risk," she says. "There's really no way we can protect people. If it were a project like that, we would be going through the IRB, there's no question about that."

She estimates she spent more than a year helping formulate proper protocols for a project Columbia is leading on the impact of the Guantánamo Bay military prison, in which former detainees as well as lawyers and judges have been interviewed. Participants retain a lot of control over their interviews, including being able to review all transcripts and delete portions if they have second thoughts.

"We have procedures in place to triple-check everything," she says.

In retrospect, Mr. Hachey, of Boston College's Center for Irish Programs, wishes he and Mr. O'Neill had subjected the Belfast Project to more scrutiny. While maintaining that it was not standard oral history, he says, "that's not to excuse us for not having been more inclusive in the beginning."

After Mr. Hughes died, in 2008, Mr. McIntyre kept his promise. Two years later, excerpts from his interview were included in Ed Moloney's Voices From the Grave: Two Men's War in Ireland, published in both Britain and the United States. It told Mr. Hughes's story and that of David Ervine, a former member of the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force and key leader in the peace process, who also had died. Mr. Hachey and Mr. O'Neill wrote the preface. A documentary soon followed.

If anyone involved with the book had a notion of the firestorm about to be ignited, it wasn't evident. Voices From the Grave represented "the inaugural volume of a planned series of publications drawn from the Boston College Oral History Archive on the Troubles in Northern Ireland," the preface announced. In one of several publicity interviews, Mr. Hachey told The Irish News that he hoped the archive would "illuminate the mind-set of people who are engaged at the operational level."
WHO KILLED JEAN MCCONVILLE?

Not everyone in Northern Ireland saw it that way. A retired detective wrote an opinion article saying that Mr. Hughes's confession could provide evidence on which to build a criminal case in Jean McConville's death. Danny Morrison, a former director of publicity for Sinn Fein, attacked the project on his blog, questioning Mr. McIntyre's and Mr. Moloney's motivations and fairness toward the IRA and Sinn Fein.

Mr. Morrison emailed Mr. Hachey to say that he would like to listen to Brendan Hughes's interviews for himself. The request took everyone involved in the project by surprise: They had never formally determined how the archive should be released and who should have access.

Mr. Moloney argued that the Hughes tapes, and recordings of others who had died, should be off-limits to all but serious scholars. They contained highly sensitive information that could be used against former IRA members. The quotations in the book and the documentary had been carefully edited. "We had to remove a lot of names for libel reasons," he wrote to Mr. Hachey, in one of a series of emails he shared with The Chronicle.

Mr. McIntyre felt the same way. While he had initially thought that someday the tapes should be made widely available, pushback from former IRA and Sinn Fein members had caused him to reconsider the timing a few months after the book's release. The house next to his, in a suburb of Dublin, where he had moved a few years earlier, had been smeared with excrement, in an attack he believed had been meant for him.

Mr. Hachey chastised the two men, writing in an email that he had "never got as much as a hint that there was any expected fallout other than unhappy IRA veterans who would have preferred that this was all left unreported," and arguing that he and Mr. O'Neill "probably would not have chosen to release the interviews for a decade or more had we anticipated this sudden change of protocol." But he also noted that they probably would not have received so much financial support from Boston College and from donors if the project had been "mothballed" for a long time.

Mr. Hachey says today that the book was Mr. Moloney's idea and that he had relied on the journalist's judgment about its likely reception in Northern Ireland: "Ed Moloney is the specialist, prize-winning journalist on Northern Ireland. McIntyre served in the paramilitaries. I thought that if they thought it was safe enough ☐ To find McIntyre and Moloney later saying, well, our lives have been placed in jeopardy, what did they expect?"

Mr. Moloney says the book was produced with his partners' full cooperation. If anything, he says, Mr. Hachey had been pressing them to publicize the project sooner. He, Mr. McIntyre, and Wilson McArthur, who interviewed loyalists, recall being asked by Mr. Hachey in 2006 if interviewees might be willing to renegotiate their contracts to allow for earlier release of their interviews. Mr. Hachey calls the claim "outrageous."
As for risks to participants in revealing the project so publicly, Mr. Moloney argues that there were none, "as long as people didn't know who had taken part in this thing" other than those who had died.

Although Mr. Hachey was able to rebuff Mr. Morrison's request for the tapes, the words of Mr. Hughes and of another project participant, Dolours Price, would come back to haunt the project organizers.

Ms. Price had also struggled to make sense of her life and her feeling of betrayal by Gerry Adams and the IRA, and had suffered from both alcoholism and depression.

Around the time Voices From the Grave was released, two newspapers published articles that said she was going to tell authorities about her participation in the abduction and murder of several people during the Troubles, including Jean McConville. One article stated that Ms. Price had "made taped confessions of her role in the abductions to academics at Boston University." The institution's name was wrong, but the reference, buried deep in the story, confirmed her involvement in the project.

The Troubles and the Tapes

- 1965-2014
- 1968 A civil-rights march heralds growing unrest.
- 1969 The Provisional Irish Republican Army is formed.

January 1972 Bloody Sunday: British paratroops fire on civil-rights protesters, killing 14

July 1972 Bloody Friday: The IRA explodes up to 22 bombs across Belfast, killing at least nine.

December 1972 Jean McConville is abducted and killed by the IRA.

- 1973 The IRA explodes two car bombs in London, killing one and injuring 200.
- 1981 A hunger strike by IRA prisoners, protesting the conditions of their interment, leads to the deaths of 10 men.
- 1983 Gerry Adams is elected president of Sinn Fein, the IRA's political counterpart.
- 1993 British and Irish governments commit to a peace process founded on self-determination.
- 1994 Talks continue among most major parties to the Troubles, and the IRA declares a cease-fire.
- 1998 The Good Friday Agreement ends fighting and begins a power-sharing arrangement.
- 1999 The IRA admits to the murder and secret burial of nine people during the Troubles, including Jean McConville.
- 2001 The Boston College Belfast oral-history project begins.
- 2003 Jean McConville's body is found on a beach in Ireland.
- 2006 The Belfast Project ends. The Police Services of Northern Ireland's ombudsman concludes the police failed to investigate Jean McConville's death.
February 2010 Dolours Price tells reporters she participated in the abduction of Jean McConville.

March 2010 Voices From the Grave, a book based on the Belfast Project, is released.

March 2011 Gerry Adams is elected a member of the Irish parliament.

May 2011 The Police Services of Northern Ireland, with the help of the U.S. Justice Department, seeks interviews with participants in the Belfast oral-history project as part of an investigation into Jean McConville's murder. Tapes of interviews with Brendan Hughes, who died in 2008, are released.

May 2013 A U.S. appeals court confirms that Boston College must turn over more of the Belfast Project interviews.

July-December 2013 Northern Irish political parties hold talks on lingering issues related to the peace process, including how to handle crimes committed during the Troubles, and fail to reach consensus.

The public now knew three things: Brendan Hughes and Dolours Price had been involved in the death of Jean McConville. Both alleged Gerry Adams had been their commanding officer. And both had participated in an oral-history project at a Boston college.

A little over a year later, the college would find out just how vulnerable that project had become.

The first subpoena arrived on May 5, 2011. Its contents were under seal. Boston College was told only that the U.S. Department of Justice, acting under a mutual-legal-assistance treaty with Britain, was seeking the interviews of Brendan Hughes and Dolours Price, for help in a criminal investigation in Northern Ireland involving kidnapping and murder.

The subpoena was a shock. None of the four principals was aware that such a treaty existed, allowing the Police Services of Northern Ireland to ask the United States for help in securing evidence they thought relevant to their case. And just two months earlier, the British government had given the college highly sensitive papers related to the disarmament process, to be kept locked away for 30 years. Yet that same government now wanted access to other sensitive documents about the same era.

"That irony was not lost on any of us," says Jack Dunn, the college's spokesman.

To some the motive was obvious: politics. Mr. Moloney, Mr. McIntyre, and other observers were quick to argue that the investigation wasn't about solving an old crime. It was about embarrassing Gerry Adams, who had just won his position in the Irish parliament.

"Clearly, for some police involved, it's an opportunity to score huge brownie points for solving one of the most atrocious crimes of the Troubles," says Mr. Moloney. "But at the same time, no policeman can start out on this investigation without knowing that it's going to end at the door of Gerry Adams."
Mr. Moloney contacted The New York Times within days of learning about the subpoena. He felt publicity was the best defense, to both rally support and pressure Boston College to fight back. He also talked to The Boston Globe, telling a reporter that the college might need to destroy the rest of the archive if forced to hand over the tapes.

That assertion rankled people on the campus. According to emails Mr. Moloney shared with The Chronicle, Boston College’s president, the Rev. William P. Leahy, was unhappy that Mr. Moloney had spoken to the press and that he had raised the possibility of destroying the collection. "We are perilously close to losing the crucial support of a president who was/is willing to take on all comers," Mr. Hachey wrote to Mr. Moloney, calling his remarks about the archive "over the top."

The next day he and Mr. O'Neill held a conference call with Mr. Moloney, Mr. McIntyre, and Mr. McArthur, the other interviewer. It was the first time, the Irish researchers recall, that their Boston College colleagues began asking questions about what exactly the interview subjects had been promised.

Less than two weeks later, Boston College turned over the Hughes interviews to the Justice Department. It kept the Price interviews, but as far as the college was concerned, it had no grounds on which to hold Hughes's tapes, because he was dead. The researchers saw that step as a dangerous concession.

No doubt, Mr. Moloney wrote in an email to Mr. Hachey, there are "teams of lawyers working in the bowels of the British government trying to discover ways to force BC to surrender the names of other possible interviewees named by Hughes." He devised a new proposal: Dispatch the rest of the archive to Mr. McIntyre, who was willing to go to jail, if needed, to keep it safe from both American and British law-enforcement agencies. Boston College immediately rejected the offer.

Instead, the college hired Jeffrey Swope, a Boston lawyer who had successfully argued a case against the Microsoft Corporation, in which the company had sought confidential interviews two scholars had conducted with officials at a rival business, the Netscape Communications Corporation. The Boston College case, Mr. Swope knew, could be a tougher fight. Courts have given more weight to the demands of a criminal investigation than they have to civil lawsuits like Microsoft's.

Mr. Swope argued that, in reviewing the government's request, the court should consider the promises of confidentiality given to sources--without which they would not have cooperated--and the value of the research itself in shedding light on the Troubles. He also argued that the release of the tapes could threaten the safety of participants, the peace process in Northern Ireland, and the broader field of oral history.

It is hard to pinpoint the moment at which the researchers and Boston College became irrevocably divided. But according to the college's lawyers, Nora E. Field and Joseph M. Herlihy, Mr. Moloney's statement to the Globe about destroying the archive was a turning point. The lawyers say they believe it led to a second subpoena three months later. (Mr. Moloney argues that the second one was an extension of the British government's "fishing expedition"--
hence his request that the college move the rest of the archive.) This subpoena revealed the focus of the police investigation: It wanted all interviews in the Boston College archive that contained information about the abduction and death of Jean McConville.

As the case progressed in court, Boston College saw itself as a vigorous defender of academic freedom within the limits of the law. The Irish researchers saw cowardice. "It's the obligation of a researcher to destroy their material before allowing it to fall into the hands of anyone who would bring it to harm," says Mr. McIntyre. "Boston College had an obligation to engage in an act of civil disobedience."

After the second subpoena was filed, Mr. Moloney and Mr. McIntyre hired their own lawyers to argue, among other things, that the mutual-legal-assistance treaty was being used for political ends, not criminal ends, and that the subpoena was capricious.

They also ratcheted up their public campaign, giving more interviews, writing op-eds, and calling on academic organizations, lawmakers, and others to get involved. Mr. McIntyre's wife, Carrie Twomey, created a website that detailed every twist and turn of the case. She also traveled four times to the United States to urge politicians and Irish-American associations to lend their support. Several members of Congress, including Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts and Sen. Charles E. Schumer of New York, were persuaded to voice their objections to Hillary R. Clinton, then secretary of state. The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts submitted a friend-of-the-court brief.

Still, Mr. Moloney felt, their efforts would have little impact on their own.

"Boston College blessing the campaign would have made just a huge difference," he says. "As it was, it was a couple of Paddies, trouble-making Paddies, fighting by themselves. Who no one cared about. We didn't have any money. We didn't have any political clout. We didn't know anyone. Who the hell were we?"

To Boston College, Mr. Moloney was an impediment in court and a distraction outside of it, publicly questioning the college's intentions.

"Had our efforts gone to Congress in identifying supporters, to work with the State Department and the Department of Justice, we could have been more effective," says Mr. Dunn, the college's spokesman. "But our efforts were involved in legal matters and distancing ourselves from the reckless rhetoric of Ed Moloney and Anthony McIntyre."

Boston College faculty members, meanwhile, were stunned by what they were reading in the newspapers.

Most surprised of all was Kevin O'Neill, an associate professor of history and former director of the Irish-studies program. Like others on the campus, he knew little of the project and had shared the puzzlement of colleagues when Voices From the Grave appeared. "The reason I understood none of us knew anything about this was the need for secrecy," he says. "Then a major participant in the project publishes a book, blowing the cover off any secrecy about it. I got a lot
of questions from my colleagues in Ireland wanting to know what the heck was going on. It was rather embarrassing."

As the court case proceeded, Mr. O'Neill, who is not related to Robert O'Neill, learned that he was supposed to have been on an oversight committee, as described in Mr. Moloney's contract. But the oversight committee had never been formed. The original group preferred to keep the project as closely held as possible. "I was shocked," Mr. O'Neill says. "It's inexplicable how you could have something in the contract like that and then not do it."

He had been asked by Mr. Hachey in early 2002 to review a couple of interview transcripts. He wrote a memorandum saying that he was impressed by their potential value to historians, but was very concerned that the interviewer didn't appear to have much experience with oral-history methodology--asking leading questions, for example. He says he never heard back from Mr. Hachey.

Kevin O'Neill and other faculty members say they believe Mr. Hachey and Robert O'Neill were able to avoid any sort of internal review because neither was based in an academic department. Mr. Hachey was also highly placed at the college. A former colleague of President Leahy's at Marquette University, he had been hired to fill the newly created position of executive director of Irish programs, which gave him authority over the Irish-studies program and the Burns Library's Irish collection, among other things.

"He was not communicating about the project to any of us in the Irish-studies program," Kevin O'Neill recalls of those early days. "He made it quite clear that his activities were none of our business."

The court case revealed other questionable aspects of the project. Some interviewees' contracts had been lost, for example, making their identities on tape irretrievable.

Eight months after the first subpoena was served, Judge William G. Young of the U.S. District Court in Boston ordered Boston College to turn over Ms. Price's interviews as well as 85 interviews of seven other former IRA members that he deemed relevant to the investigation.

The college considered Judge Young's ruling a victory in one key way: It rebuffed the government's argument that the court was required to order the college to release all materials requested, without passing judgment on what might be relevant. The judge agreed that subpoenas of confidential academic research deserved heightened scrutiny. Even so, Boston College believed the judge's interpretation of relevancy was overly broad. Both the college and the researchers filed appeals.

On January 25, 2012, five days after the court ordered the tapes handed over, Ireland's public radio station, RTE, broadcast a report about the Belfast Project. During it, Mr. Dunn, the college's spokesman, described Mr. Moloney as a questionable partner who was out for money.

"I think quite frankly that Mr. Moloney was so excited about this project and quite frankly so eager to write a book from which he would profit," Mr. Dunn said, "that he chose to ignore the
obvious statements that were made to him, including a contract he had signed expressing the limits of confidentiality."

It was a narrative that Boston College was to employ regularly in the news media, one in which the college was a victim of Mr. Moloney's recklessness.

There was a problem with that version of events, however. Not only had Robert O'Neill and Mr. Hachey written a glowing preface to the book, but each had received 25 percent of the royalties. Mr. Dunn acknowledged in a follow-up interview with RTE that he had not known about the payments.

But he, Mr. O'Neill, and Mr. Hachey continued to argue that Mr. Moloney had known about the limits of the confidentiality agreements and chosen to ignore them. Specifically, they noted that Mr. O'Neill had written in a letter to Mr. Moloney a month before their dinner at Deanes Restaurant that "I cannot guarantee, for example, that we would be in a position to refuse to turn over documents on a court order without being held in contempt."

The two researchers put forth a competing narrative, in which Boston College had failed to fully vet the legalities of the project and had made promises it couldn't keep, putting everyone involved at needless risk. Mr. O'Neill, they said, was reassuring when they met over dinner in Belfast. "Bob O'Neill made it very clear that nothing--and the words he used were 'legal repercussions'--he said nothing would be permitted or accepted into the library if there were legal repercussions for those involved," recalls Mr. McIntyre.

Mr. McArthur, who interviewed loyalists, corroborates that view. He says he was told by Mr. O'Neill when he joined the project, around 2003, that it was legally protected. "The phrase that stuck in my mind was 'ironclad,'" he says. In conversations with Mr. Hachey, whom he met later, "it was implicit in everything we said."

Key Documents

* Project Proposal

* Boston College's Reply

* The Contracts

* Dolours Price Admits Participation in Project

Mr. O'Neill says he never made such promises. Boston College's chief lawyer, Mr. Herlihy, confirms that he told the librarian, in their one, very general conversation about the proposed project, that U.S. courts have never given absolute protections to academic research. "Once I had the advice of counsel," says Mr. O'Neill, "I would not have taken it upon myself to nullify the position."
Even so, the contracts with interviewees made no mention of legal limits on confidentiality. "I am working on the wording of the contract to be signed by the interview[ee], and I'll run this by Tom [Hachey] and university counsel," Mr. O'Neill wrote to Mr. Moloney in early 2001, the day the journalist signed on as project director.

Mr. O'Neill never did check with a lawyer about the wording. Instead, the one-page document said that the interview subject had agreed to give Boston College possession of the interview, which would be restricted until after the person died, unless he or she otherwise allowed.

"In retrospect, that was my mistake," Mr. O'Neill says. "The contract unfortunately omitted the phrase 'to the extent American law allows.'" But he and Boston College maintain that all participants were ultimately subject to the terms of Mr. Moloney's contract, in which that requirement was clearly stated, and that the researchers understood this.

Mr. Moloney disagrees.

"If that phrase had been in the donor contract, that project would have been dead," Mr. Moloney says now. "There's no way myself, Anthony McIntyre, or any of the participants would have had anything to do with it because it would have been a red flag, and we would have immediately have said, 'What the hell does that mean?'

To many academic observers the Boston College case, as troubling as it was, remains an oddity. Not many oral historians choose to interview members of paramilitary organizations. And few universities contract out such work.

But the case has had a chilling effect among scholars. Richard L. English, director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland, says he has heard from a number of researchers seeking advice about whether to pursue research on political violence if it includes interviewing those involved in conflict. "I think the fallout is much wider than Northern Ireland," he says. "There has been a shadow cast over this kind of research."

Clifford M. Kuhn, executive director of the Oral History Association, says the Belfast Project offers several lessons. Make sure you consult your legal team in advance, for one, and get the top administration on board. "Perhaps a word of wisdom is, if you have this kind of project," he adds, "don't open it up until all participants are deceased. At the very least, do your best not to publicize it."

Ted S. Palys and John Lowman, professors in Simon Fraser University's School of Criminology who have written extensively about legal protection of confidential research, say the Belfast Project illustrates the necessity of outside review, by both a university research board and university lawyers. No doubt such a review would have raised questions about the wisdom of releasing information about the project while some participants were still alive, they say. It also would have caught the inconsistencies, negligence, and lack of awareness of the legal landscape before the project even started.
The project remains controversial on the Boston College campus. Faculty members have repeatedly asked the administration to explain how it came about.

Susan A. Michalczyk, president of the campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors, says the lack of on-campus consultation conveyed "a complete lack of understanding of what a research university is supposed to be about. No one can have a pet project, and no one individual should make decisions on something as sensitive as this without taking seriously what the specialists in those areas would be able to offer."

Last May, Boston College won a victory of sorts when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit ruled that the district court had "abused its discretion" in determining which tapes were relevant to the criminal investigation. It greatly scaled back the number of tapes to be turned over, from 85 to 11.

Ms. Price's interviews were released in full. She had died at her home a few months earlier, and Boston College saw no grounds for keeping them.

What will become of the dozens of tapes now in the hands of the police in Northern Ireland is unclear. The police have not spoken publicly about why they sought the recordings, and they declined to speak to The Chronicle.

What is clear is that in Belfast the past lives on. The investigations into Jean McConville's death and others who disappeared during the Troubles are mired in political infighting. Giant murals celebrating the martyrdom of fighters on both sides are daily reminders to passing shoppers of what was sacrificed. The so-called peace walls, a series of metal, concrete, and barbed-wire barriers erected during the Troubles to provide buffers between Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods, have never been taken down.

"Truth isn't used here for reconciliation," says Mr. McIntyre. "Truth is used here for recrimination. It's about poking your enemy in the eye."

Robert O'Neill retired last month from Boston College. Mr. McIntyre and Mr. Moloney say they've worked little in the past few years, spending most of their resources and time battling the case and Boston College.

"To me, personally, it's the single most devastating thing that ever happened to me," says Mr. McIntyre, worse even than going to prison. Boston College's reputation has been tarnished.

Faculty members say they're still questioned about the case by colleagues at other universities. "There's institutional failure there on the part of Boston College, not just the interviewers," says Ms. Clark, of Columbia.

The remaining interviews are locked away in a vault inside the Burns Library. A number of participants--including everyone interviewed on the loyalist side--have asked for their recordings back. Mr. Dunn says the college will consider those requests and honor them "to the extent we are able."
The project itself is dead. No more books, no more revelations, no further insights into the minds of former paramilitary fighters. "It can never be used now," says Mr. Moloney. "It's all done for nothing."

The project's four organizers (clockwise from top left): Thomas Hachey, Boston College's head of Irish programs; Ed Moloney, project director and journalist; Anthony McIntyre, project interviewer, historian, and former IRA member; and Robert O'Neill, head of the Burns Library at BC.

Sixteen years after the Good Friday Agreement, the so-called peace walls--a series of metal, concrete, and barbed-wire barriers erected during the Troubles to serve as buffers between Protestant and Roman Catholic neighborhoods--have never been taken down.

The oral history of the Troubles was to be part of the vast collection of Irish material in Boston College's Burns Library (left). A memorial on a Belfast building (right) provides a stark recollection of those dark years.

Riots swept Belfast in 1981, following the death of Bobby Sands, an imprisoned IRA member, in a hunger strike.

Debris filled a street in Belfast after IRA bombings in 1972 that became known as Bloody Friday.

A rain of rocks and Molotov cocktails greeted security forces before Bobby Sands' funeral, in 1981.

A boy outside Divis Flats, the grim Belfast apartment complex from which Jean McConville was abducted.

Pro-republican writing on a wall in a Roman Catholic part of Belfast, 2013.

A memorial to Protestant victims of sectarian violence in a loyalist part of Belfast, 2013.

Gates separating Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods bear slogans celebrating peace and reconciliation. The gates close at 10 p.m. and do not open again until 6 a.m.

Brendan Hughes, a former IRA commander, said he once considered Gerry Adams, the Sinn Fein leader, as a brother (the wall photo shows them in prison together). In the tapes, Mr. Hughes reflected bitterly on his life's work.

A bookshelf at Anthony McIntyre's home displays a photo of Brendan Hughes and Dolours Price, both former IRA soldiers, at the wedding of Mr. McIntyre and Carrie Twomey.

Jean McConville (left), with three of her 10 children, shortly before she was abducted, in 1972.

British soldiers man barricades with rubber bullets at the ready.
Wreckage strews a London street after a car bomb explodes outside the Old Bailey courthouse.

Gerry Adams on the campaign trail.

A shrine marks the Irish beach where the body of Jean McConville was unearthed.

Kevin O'Neill, a former director of Boston College's Irish-studies program, was stunned to learn he was supposed to have served on a committee overseeing the Belfast Project.

Belfast Project interviews that remain in Boston College's hands are locked away in a vault inside a campus library.

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