



Martin Levy



BAN THE BOMB!



Michael Randle



and Direct Action against Nuclear War



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Foreword

This book is a delight on many levels. First, Martin Levy gives us a history of a remarkable man in a thoroughly absorbing way. Through many discussions with Michael, as well as some with Anne, he takes us through a life well lived, with many illustrations that help to give us an idea of where Michael came from and what helped make him. Through a series of interviews stretching over many months, we build a picture not just of Michael but of the history of nonviolent action in Britain over seven decades. It is a thoroughly unusual approach to biography, but it works a treat.

Then there is Michael himself, peace-campaigner, activist, scholar and much more, ready to go to prison for his beliefs yet gentle and patient in his determination to do the right thing. Most of his life's work has been in Britain, but the span of his contacts is global and through the interviews we come in contact with many of the leading campaigners and thinkers on nonviolence over all of those decades. That alone gives us a unique perspective on an informal yet resolute belief system that is always there and comes to the fore in unexpected ways, whether in peace campaigning, civil rights movements, the collapse of the Soviet system, or in other contexts.

There are also interludes when the unexpected suddenly intrudes, not least the astonishing and successful attempt to spring the spy George Blake from Wormwood Scrubs Prison and to keep him hidden at various locations in London. The hair-raising story of how Blake's cover was almost blown by Michael's encounter with a friend's wife outside a tube station in London is remarkable enough, but to add to this we have the trial of Michael and Pat Pottle, a co-conspirator, at the Old Bailey many years later. Their acquittal was unexpected and so the powers-that-be inevitably termed it the action of a 'perverse jury', but it would still make a marvellous film.

There is also Michael the scholar, not just his core role in the Alternative Defence Commission's pioneering work on non-nuclear defence back in the 1980s, but his own work on nonviolence

and civilian resistance and his wider contributions to the Bradford School of Peace Studies.

I have been fortunate to have known Michael for forty years and have been lucky to work with him on several occasions. In his own quiet way, and with no fuss, he persists in his optimism against the odds and serves as a remarkable inspiration to many. This book is a fitting tribute to a remarkable person.

Paul Rogers, June 2020.

Introduction

The Judge asked if there was any justification for breaking the law?
'An individual has to make a decision where millions of lives are concerned.'
'Does that mean you and other members of the Committee of 100?'
'Every individual must decide Every individual has to decide between
the law and his own morality.'

Mr Justice Havers 'in dialogue' with Michael Randle.¹

Anyone who has ever read a book about civil rights or taken part in an illegal demonstration will recognise the above distinction between law and personal morality, state power and the promptings of the individual conscience. It was some such distinction that inspired the Biblical Daniel to defy a decree of the Babylonian King Darius, and which led to the execution of Socrates for impiety and demoralising the young people of Athens in 399 BCE.

The issue that confronted the jury in Court No.1 of the Old Bailey during February 1962 was the morality of bombing civilians with nuclear weapons. The state in the person of its chief witness, Air Commodore Graham Magill, said that should circumstances so demand it, it was moral. Michael Randle and his co-defendants, to their credit, took the contrary view.

The proximate cause that brought Michael to the Old Bailey trial was a blockade and mass trespass of the NATO air base at RAF Wethersfield, in Essex, a little over three months earlier. On trial were Michael and his five co-defendants: Terry Chandler, Ian Dixon, Pat Pottle, Trevor Hatton and Helen Allegranza, all senior officers in the Committee of 100, an organisation set up to campaign by non-violent means for nuclear disarmament.

They were charged on two counts under section one of the Official Secrets Act of 1911: first, conspiring together to commit a breach of the Act by entering the air base for a 'purpose prejudicial

1 "On Trial: A Twelve Page Report with Comments, Disallowed Evidence and Profiles. ... A Peace News Special Supplement," *Peace News* [February 1962]: 8.

to the safety or interests of the State' and second, conspiring to 'incite others to do likewise.'²

As for the distant causes which led to the prosecution, I'll say a bit more about those later on.

Here it is enough to state that Michael and his co-defendants were anything but political or legal innocents. They knew their rights. No wonder they got up the nose of the haughty and contemptuous chief prosecuting council, the Attorney-General, Sir Reginald Manningham-Buller.

'Now Randle', Sir Reginald began on one occasion at about halfway through the trial. 'I am *Mr Randle*,' Michael shot back.³ He simply could not be intimidated.

I first met Michael during the late summer of 2017. Though 'met' probably isn't the right word as I didn't meet him, I met his archive.

Back then I had a part-time job assisting the special collections librarian at Bradford University, where one of my responsibilities was to retrieve the documents that researchers had ordered from the storerooms.

One day someone asked to see Michael's archive and, following my usual custom, I looked into it myself and was intrigued. It was packed with remarkable documents on anti-nuclear protest and letters from such notables as Bertrand Russell, Albert Schweitzer and Noam Chomsky.

A few weeks after that, I was sitting in the staffroom and I had an idea: 'Why don't I interview Michael?' I knew by then that he had been interviewed before, but maybe I could get the whole story, not just the bits that people already knew or thought they knew about.

The next day I sent him an email. Was he up for it? He was.

2 Thomas Grant, *Jeremy Hutchinson's Case Histories* (London: John Murray, 2015), 246.

3 "On Trial," 8. My italics.

Michael lives a few miles outside of Bradford, in Shipley, in a turning off the Bingley Road as you proceed towards Cottingley; and I remember thinking as I got off the bus, this is a neighbourhood where I would like to live.

It is suburban with a bit of bling. There are cafes and lots of charity shops and the great, hulking mass of the Victorian Salts Mill not more than a few minutes' walk away.

Michael's a smallish man in his mid-eighties, his head is full of white hair and yet he's surprisingly good on his feet. I liked him as soon as I set eyes on him.

Usually, you can tell a lot about someone from their living room. Michael's is comfortable and unpretentious. There are paintings and family photographs on the walls, two large sofas, a rectangular wooden coffee table, an ancient television in one of the far corners and a well-stocked bookcase near the door, containing volumes by Yeats, Chesterton, Keats and some of the better-known 'sixties poets.

After I'd set the voice recorder up and we'd chatted for about forty minutes, he asked me if I wanted coffee. It was then that Anne appeared. Anne is Michael's wife. She's younger than Michael by ten years or so.

She's also, I soon discovered, the practical one. Michael sees things as they should be, Anne sees them mostly as they are. They could be antagonists, but instead they complement each other.

I could have improvised the interviews, flown by the seat of my pants. But there's more to a proper interview than turning up at the right time and asking a few questions. You need to prepare yourself with a bit of reading, prove to the interviewee that, though you may not be an expert, you do at least know what you're talking about.

Fortunately, from the point of view of preparation, I could not have been better placed. Not only did I have Michael's archive back in Special Collections, but I had a number of other relevant archives too, not to mention the university library itself, which is stocked

with all sorts of important-looking books on anti-nuclear protest and social movements more generally.

People who work in special collections departments often talk about the archives 'speaking' to each other, which sounds poetic if not downright fey – the proximity to all that paper must rot the brain. But, in an important sense, it's true. They do speak to each other, even though the order in which they are arranged on the shelves sometimes suggests otherwise.

Michael's archive speaks most to the Hugh Brock Papers and to the archives of the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War, the Committee of 100 (collected by Derry Hannam) and *Peace News*.

These five archives therefore provided much of the information behind the questions I asked him.

And then it also speaks to books, pamphlets, magazines and newspapers, including the newspaper that gave rise to the *Peace News* archive in the first place – which, luckily, the university has a full set of. Indeed, it is one of the jewels of the University library's Commonweal Collection.

As for *Peace News*, how many people on the left read it nowadays? Hundreds? Thousands? I know that Michael does. I know that because he is still an occasional contributor.

When Michael joined *Peace News* as a sales organiser in the late 1950s, it was about to enter its golden age. Under the editorship of Hugh Brock, a generation of new and younger activist-writers and writer-activists made their mark: Chris Farley, Alan Lovell, Albert Hunt, Pat Arrowsmith, April Carter, John Arden, Michael himself and many others.

Most of them were anarchists. They brought with them powerful ideas, some of which originated in the New Left, writing about film, theatre, art, music and literature with sharper eyes and ears.

But, most importantly, they brought new thinking on non-violent direct action, specifically in relation to nuclear weapons, turning the paper into what can fairly be described as the most interesting and exciting radical newspaper of the 1960s.

Indeed, it was *Peace News* that drew Michael to non-violent direct action in the first place.

In 1952, just a few weeks after he'd registered as a conscientious objector, he read an account of a sit-down outside the War Office (now the Ministry of Defence) by a tiny group called Operation Gandhi.

The article appeared on the front page on 18 January under the headline 'Pacifists told Police and War Office: "We are coming to Squat"'.

I know they are the exact words, because I'm sitting in the library and holding the paper now.

The article fills about a third of the space and is illustrated with a photograph of two policemen, plus two other men and two women: Geoffrey Plummer, Harry Mister, Dorothy Wheeler and Kathleen Rawlins. Both of the women are smiling.

It describes what inspired the sit-down: opposition to NATO and the facts that Britain was rearming and being 'converted into one of the chief atomic bomb bases of the world'; and explains what happened to the demonstrators when they refused the police request to depart: their arrest and removal to Bow Street Police Court, where they were charged with obstruction.

If it is true that a single newspaper article can change a life, then reading this article changed Michael's. Not that he would put it that way—Michael isn't melodramatic. But, quite simply, it launched him on a lifetime of non-violent anti-nuclear activism.

But why Operation Gandhi? In other words, why the name? What did Gandhi have to do with nuclear weapons, anyway? The answer to the third question is not a lot. But he had a method of non-violent resistance that the little group adopted, as did Michael in his turn.

The method was called Satyagraha or Truth Force—'satya' in Gujarati meaning 'truth' and 'agraha' meaning 'force' or 'firmness'; and it was a complete method of non-violent resistance, emphasising courage, discipline, self-sacrifice, love and, as the headline makes clear, openness and fair-dealing with opponents.

That makes it sound vague, quasi-religious, and not particularly exciting. In some senses it was vague. Unexciting it was not. In any case, it was the method that inspired them, first to the War Office sit-down, then shortly afterwards to other demonstrations, first at a little known atomic research establishment at Aldermaston, in the Berkshire countryside, then a few months later at a NATO missile base, near Chippenham in Suffolk.

Operation Gandhi then was the organisation that put non-violent anti-nuclear protest on the map, and which drew Michael into non-violent anti-nuclear activism into the first place. But it was the Direct Action Committee (DAC) which followed it, that turned Michael into a national figure.

Operation Gandhi was small-scale. The number of activists never amounted to more than thirty. It hardly bothered anyone, whereas the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War (to use its full name) was larger, better organised, more focused, and determined from the outset to be a major thorn in the government's nuclear weapons programme.

Michael was its second chairman, taking over from Hugh Brock during the summer of 1958.

Its purpose? It's there in the title: *direct action* against nuclear war.

In practical terms this meant that it had less patience than Operation Gandhi with moral exhortation. Not that it didn't try it. It did. On numerous occasions. But nuclear weapons were a national emergency. It wanted the unilateral nuclear disarmament of Britain and it wanted it now. Thus, it was much more willing to raise the ante as far as civil disobedience was concerned, while nonetheless remaining firmly within the tradition of satyagraha.

But first, it organised the first Aldermaston march. Or rather Hugh Brock and Pat Arrowsmith organised it, with help from Michael and Labourites Frank Allaun, MP, and Walter Wolfgang.

You'll read more about Pat Arrowsmith in the interviews that follow this introduction. Next to Hugh Brock and April Carter, she was probably Michael's closest DAC colleague.

As for the march, it took place over Easter 1958 and was a huge success. Nothing was able to stop it. Neither the anti-direct action leadership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Nor the Communist Party of Great Britain, which tried to co-opt it. Nor the once-famous McWhirter twins with their Mercedes car and megaphone, who called the marchers communist dupes. Not even the weather, which was atrocious.

Thousands of people walked at least part of the route: London via Hounslow and Reading to Aldermaston.

Thereafter, delegates from the marchers carried a resolution to the British, American and Russian governments calling upon them to desist from testing, manufacturing or storing nuclear weapons. All, however, remained unmoved – though the Russian embassy, scenting a propaganda coup, did at least agree to meet and parley with the delegates, amongst whom was Michael.

Indeed, it was this frustration with the government's inaction which partly explains the DAC's next major success in terms of media impact: a series of attempts to obstruct the building of one of NATO's new nuclear missile bases at RAF North Pickenham, near Swaffham, Norfolk, during December 1958 – just as it partly explains the formation of the anti-nuclear organisation that Michael was next involved in: the much bigger, more combative, more politically diffuse and thus inevitably much less Gandhian Committee of 100.

Again, something had to be done. If one method of countering the Nuclear Behemoth didn't work, then the demonstrators would try another one.

But let Michael describe the Committee of 100, of which he was secretary. Here I only want to say that it tested his and the other leaders' resolution to the utmost and that it did indeed, as the beginning of this introduction suggests, lead to increasingly draconian government action.

For his part in organising the blockade and mass trespass of RAF Wethersfield, Michael received a prison sentence of eighteen months, of which he served twelve. At the time, this was the

longest sentence imposed by a British court for opposition to nuclear weapons.

That, in a very small nutshell, is the story of the direct action phase of Michael's anti-nuclear activism. But, of course, he wasn't—isn't—just against nuclear weapons. Hating nuclear weapons is the easy bit. He also had a positive vision of what a nuclear disarmed Britain and indeed a nuclear disarmed world might look like.

It's important for me to say something about this as well. For Michael has been an activist on many fronts, not least in association with War Resisters' International, of which he has been a council and an executive member.

Underpinning his position on nuclear weapons was a particular view of politics: deeply respectful of human rights, democratic, but not party-political. But, on the contrary, profoundly convinced of the power of civil disobedience to keep our democracies 'honest' and to hold the dictatorships to account for their many offences.

Here too, Gandhi was—and again is—a central influence. Another was the Dutch anarcho-syndicalist Bart de Ligt, whose book *The Conquest of Violence*, he first read in the edition with an introduction by Aldous Huxley.

As for the other notable organisations and important events that Michael has been involved in: the so-called 'springing' of his former prison mate, the Russian spy George Blake, from Wormwood Scrubs; a further long stretch in prison for 'invading' the Greek Embassy in London; a campaign to support Czechoslovakian independence in the face of a real, Russian, invasion; another major trial at the Old Bailey, this time for helping Blake escape — those too, I'll leave him to describe himself. Needless to say, as even this short list suggests, his life post the 1962 highpoint of his anti-nuclear activism has been anything but short of incident or complications.

Instead I want to say something about the other Michael, the man who Paul Rogers in his foreword to this book calls 'Michael the scholar'. For this is the Michael that I met.

It is the Michael of our interviews, the amusing and unfailingly gracious host, the former rugby player (for Brighton Town, if you're interested), the man who loves literature and music, who laughs a lot and who isn't afraid of showing his emotions.

I've already mentioned how I prepared the questions. This is how the interviews worked.

Following that first morning in 2017, I'd usually arrive for our interviews at about 10 o'clock. We'd then spend two hours or so, working through a portion of my questions.

Sometimes I'd focus my questions on a particular person or organisation, say Ralph Schoenman or Operation Gandhi, but more usually I'd concentrate on a period, perhaps of two to three years, and we'd work through that, week by week or month by month, depending on how busy Michael's schedule had been—and sometimes he had been very busy.

That said, if Michael wanted to take the conversation in a different direction or something interesting cropped up that I hadn't thought about, all to the good. We'd talk about that and then return to the prepared questions afterwards.

Sometimes Anne would join us, sometimes not. Anne's memories are often different to Michael's. Michael is best at public events: the demonstrations, the marches, the big speeches. Anne at the domestic angle. Then she's also good at filling in details. So, if, as occasionally happened, Michael forgot a name, she could usually be relied upon to supply it.

After copying up an interview, I would take it to the library, surround myself with pamphlets, newspapers and books, and go through the factual statements one by one. It wasn't often that I found anything that could be construed as an error. I would then forward the same interview to Michael, in case he wanted to make any changes of detail or emphasis.

In all, I must have done about twenty-five interviews. However, in the interests of readability, I've reorganised them and reduced them to eleven. These are the essential Michael.

Finally, a further word about politics.

Naturally, I didn't agree with everything Michael said during our interviews. He's on the libertarian left. So am I, but I'm grouchy with it. He's a consummate team player. I don't travel well in groups. Michael is also more understanding of identity politics than I am. He sees the benefits. I see intolerance and division.

But on the fundamental issues of non-violent direct action and the intolerable nature of nuclear weapons, I believe that he has absolutely made the right call.

If this book is your first acquaintance with Michael Randle, you can count yourself lucky and unlucky. Lucky because you have much to look forward to. Unlucky because you didn't discover him earlier.

1. Family and Schooling

Let's begin at the beginning. When and where were you born?

I was born on the 21st December 1933 at a nursing home near Worcester Park in Surrey.

Had your parents been in the area long?

I think for a couple of years. My mother came over from Dublin in the mid-twenties and married my dad in 1931.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

There was only one brother before I was born. But the family kept growing and by 1949, when my youngest sister, Joan, arrived, there were nine of us children in all, three boys and six girls.

What did your father do for a living at the time of your birth?

He ran a children's clothing factory, Hitchen, Smith & Co., Ltd., in Old Street, London. The firm was originally based in Nottingham specialising in lace wear. Nottingham was where his father's family hailed from, though he himself was born and brought up in Folkestone and London. His father took over the firm sometime in the 1920s after it ran into financial difficulties and moved it to London.

Did your father employ many people?

It wasn't a big factory, but there must have been thirty or forty people. I occasionally did some work there when I was on holiday from school.

So, the company stayed in business for some time ...

Oh, yes. Later on, in the 1950s, my brother Arthur took it over after graduating in accountancy from the London Polytechnic and doing National Service in the army.

Tell me about your mother.

My mother, Ellen, came from what was pretty much a working-class family, with roots in County Carlow and Kildare. Her father, Patrick Treacy, was from Bagenalstown in County Carlow and set up as a builder in Dublin employing a few people; her mother, Esther Treacy, née Dowd, was from Prosperous in County Kildare. My mother worked in a local shop before coming over to England and entering service.

How did your parents meet?

They met at a New Year's Eve party. I think at a Conservative Club. But neither of them was active in the party and I don't think that my mother was ever a member. I'm not sure about my father.

I know that you were brought up as a Catholic. Were both your parents Catholics?

My father was brought up in the Church of England and it was only after meeting my mother that he decided to change. But it was very much a gradual thing. My mother told me that he asked her so many questions while they were courting about the Catholic faith that she finally asked him, 'Well, are you thinking of becoming a Catholic, Arthur?' And he replied, 'No, no. I'm just interested in finding out a bit more.' This was at a period when there was a revival of interest in that whole Cardinal Newman wing of Catholicism. But then he did convert to Catholicism.



Fig 1: Michael's parents at their wedding in April 1931. Photographer unknown. Private Collection.

So, I would imagine you attended mass as a youngster.

You bet. Mass and Benediction [laughs]. It was coming from both sides at that point!

Bearing in mind your father's business interests, you obviously had quite a posh upbringing. Did that include servants?

We always had at least one maid, who was nearly always Irish and usually someone my mother got through contacts in Ireland. I remember one young woman called Moira, whom we all liked and got along well with. Then I also remember an Englishwoman called Rose, who came and helped as well.

Would you say that your parents were happily married?

On the whole, yes. The only cause of serious tension between them stemmed from the fact that during the late 'forties dad changed back to the C of E. Why was that? He had become critical of the whole Catholic ethos and the clericalism. Then there was another reason: he got the idea that there was something going on between my mother and an Irish priest, who used to visit. But *that* I'm sure was nonsense.

Were you a sociable child?

Well, I had my school friends and other children. The first school I went to was St. Cecilia's in North Cheam and one of my best friends there was a boy named Jimmy Seymour, whose parents ran a greengrocer's shop not far from where we lived in Cheam village. But then the war came and my family moved around a bit. In fact, initially, all of us except probably my dad moved to Merthyr Tydfil, in Wales, to a house which belonged to a Cheam couple. Then, when the Blitz started, my brother, Arthur, my sister, Margaret, and I were sent to Ireland, to a Catholic boarding school, St Dominic's College, in Cabra, West Dublin.

Did you miss your parents?

Of course, but probably no more than any other child in that situation. In any case, during the school holidays I stayed with my mother's parents and my aunt, Nan, who had a house in Inchicore

on the west side of Dublin, and who all made sure that I was very well looked after. And I wasn't on my own. Although Margaret stayed with cousins during the holidays, I always had my older brother, Arthur, for company. Then, during the latter part of the war, another sister, Terry, arrived, who, incidentally, was very intelligent and quick witted. Then, there was a cousin on my mother's side, a Catholic priest, Uncle Tom, who used to come and play rebel songs on the piano like 'Kevin Barry' and 'Kelly, the Boy from Killane'. So, yes, I did miss them. But not quite as badly as I could have done.



Fig 2: Michael's maternal grandmother, Esther Treacy, and his Aunt Nan, with child. Early 1940s. Photographer unknown. Private Collection.

Did you return to England during the war?

No, but my parents used to come over at least once a year, bringing with them a growing number of younger siblings to meet me.

Let's rewind a bit back to St. Cecilia's, to 1939. People knew that war was coming. Do you remember gas drill, for instance?

I do remember having a gas mask and learning how to put it on and the smell of rubber that came from it. I don't remember organised drill, but at school when there was an air raid warning, we'd put them on and go down to the main shelter in the playground and have our lessons there. I have a vivid memory of the smell of concrete. We used to have little hand-held blackboards to write things on.

Slates?

That's right. The first time I ever got smacked at school was when I annoyed the teacher by slapping the thing on my knee [laughs]. But at that point the war for me was just an adventure. I had no understanding of the danger. We used to pray for peace, but I remember thinking, I don't want this thing to end too soon; it's too exciting. Not that I wanted to be a soldier. But the air raid warnings and the shelters were thrilling. At home I slept under the stairs, which was supposed to be the safest place. Then at some point we also had an air raid shelter in the garden.

What was your parents' attitude to the war?

Well, my father was against it, not on political grounds as far as I know, but on moral grounds. Early on he registered as a conscientious objector, but his application was rejected. However, because he was in a vital industry, the clothing industry, he was exempted from military service, anyway.

Can you tell me something about the experience of being at St. Dominic's?

For starters, it was run by Dominican nuns. Three of us went there: Arthur, Margaret and me, while Terry went to a local day-school in Inchicore. I remember our excitement at the prospect of being at a school where you slept in. We thought that was terrific.

But when we got there it was very strict and oddly puritanical.



Fig 3: Michael (on the right) with his older brother, Arthur, on Killiney Hill, County Wicklow. Early 1940s. Photograph by Arthur Randle senior. Private Collection.

How so?

Well, I remember one kid who was very young, probably just three or four. One day he got up in the dormitory. His pyjama bottoms fell down, and he was beaten with the thick leather strap that was used for administering punishment. Then I remember other examples of the nuns' severity. In the school grounds there was an institute for the deaf and dumb, some of whose inmates worked as servants at the school. One day, one of them came in to clean out the fireplace in the classroom, and the nun in charge got upset because the boys smiled and nodded to her. Heaven knows what she thought that they'd done, but she reported the matter to Sister Mary Imelda Joseph, and, my God, there were absolute

ructions over it. She beat the boys' hands with a leather strap. In fact, the only boy amongst us who did not get beaten was my brother, Arthur. He stuck to his guns and said, 'I don't see what we've done wrong.' I suppose that Sister Mary Imelda Joseph must have respected that.

Incidentally, we learned quite a few signs from the servants, one of which was, 'I'm going to sneak on you.' We thought of them as fellow sufferers!

Did the war impinge much on your life at the college?

Not really, but I do remember very clearly the occasion when the Germans bombed the North Strand district of Dublin, whether by accident or as a warning I don't know. I was asleep in bed at the time and had a nightmare that bombs were falling from the sky and exploding behind me as I tried to run away. Then I woke up and realised that they were real explosions. One of the nuns dashed in and we recited the prayer we always said last thing at night, 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph. I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Mary and Joseph assist me now and in my last agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph may I breathe out my soul in peace with you. Amen.'

Something to cheer you up then.

Yes, I suppose so [laughs]. Afterwards, we were all bundled into a sort of basement in the girls' part of the college, where the resident priest led us in reciting The Rosary.

Did you experience any bullying from other children at the convent, coming as you did from a mixed Anglo-Irish background?

Well, there was certainly quite a bit of hostility towards Britain, but, no, I wouldn't say that I was bullied. Possibly I was helped in that respect by the fact that my mother was Irish and that the priest who came to examine the pupils' knowledge of catechism and Catholic teaching was none other than my mother's cousin, Uncle Tom, from Ballsbridge! However, things in one period did

get tense. That was when Churchill demanded the use of the Irish ports, in accordance with a clause in the 1922 Anglo-Irish Agreement guaranteeing the British access to them in an emergency. Such an action would have compromised Irish neutrality and possibly brought the country into the war, so De Valera refused. So, there was a bit of a scare as to whether Churchill's demand was going to lead to hostilities with Britain. I remember a boy called George Harris and some of his mates sitting in a huddle and saying that if it did come to war that they would kill me and all the other English boys.

You must have felt quite threatened.

Not really. Actually, I think it just made me feel more English!

Any republicans on your mother's side?

Yes, indeed. A first cousin of my grandfather, Seán (or 'Johnny') Tracey, from Ballsbridge, took part in the 1916 uprising and was among those interned for a period in an army camp in North Wales after the uprising was suppressed. One family story was that when the insurgents were defending the General Post Office against the British attempt to recapture it, Johnny swapped positions with another man because one of them, I can't remember which, was left-handed. The man he swapped places with was killed in the fighting. However, I didn't discover all that until some years after returning to England. It would have stood me in good stead had I known about it while at school in Cabra.

My mother also recounted to me the story of how her father had hidden some sensitive republican documents at the back of a framed picture in the front room. Soon afterwards the house was raided by the British army, which had been tipped off by one of the neighbours that known rebels had been seen visiting it. My mother told of how she struggled not to look at the picture while the raid was going on. I made a video recording of my mother in 1998 talking about her life, and she gives a vivid account of her

experience as a child of 10 of the 1916 uprising, and of afterwards hearing the shots from Kilmainham Gaol as the leaders of the uprising were executed. The man, who'd brought the documents, by the way, was Peadar Doyle. He later became the Lord Mayor of Dublin.

Then there was another republican connection with the family in that my mother's sister, Peg, was engaged to, and eventually married, a Peter Sorahan, who took part in the guerrilla war during the 1918-1921 period and, afterwards, fought on the Republican side in the tragic civil war that followed it. 'Uncle Peter' was eventually taken prisoner during the civil war and served time in Kilmainham Gaol. He and Peg went to live in New York, after his release, though they returned in the 1960s to live with Nan in her home in Inchicore.

I learnt more about all this bit by bit, but certainly knew the essential facts by the time I was myself sentenced to 18 months in prison in 1962. By then the family had moved to a farm in Fletching, a small village near Uckfield, East Sussex. I don't know what it's like now, but then it was a very conservative village. One of the adjoining farms was owned by a retired colonel, and you'd see men and women in redcoats riding to hounds. In other words, it was all very English and traditional. Anyway, the colonel's wife spoke to my mother on one occasion and said, 'Don't you feel ashamed that your son is in prison?' 'No!', my mother replied. 'Where I grew up, we were proud of people who went to prison for their convictions.'

Following the war, Michael, did you return to England immediately?

No, not immediately. My father's great ambition at this time was to have a farm — he was already a keen allotment holder —, and we spent some time looking at farms in Ireland. There was talk then of the whole family moving there. But that didn't work out. We returned to England in August 1945, just a couple of days before VJ Day. I remember we went up to London and watched the King and Queen come out onto the balcony of Buckingham Palace and wave.