

How Gordon saved Don

Growing up in nationalist Derry during the early years of the Troubles, author and journalist Don Mullan had an unusual hero: England goalkeeper Gordon Banks. He spoke to **Deirdre Mullins** about his formative years and his dyslexia

When 17-year-old Michael Kelly was shot dead by British troops in Derry in 1972, writer Don Mullan was standing nearby. “I saw him crumple and collapse, his cry filling the air with despair and disbelief,” says Mullan, who was 15 at the time. “To my right I saw the bullets spit dust as they thundered into the barricade, and I recall in the confused trauma others to my right gasping with pain as they fell to the ground.”

Mullan’s research into the events of 30 January 1972 became the bestselling book, *Eyewitness Bloody Sunday*, and was a catalyst for the establishment of the Saville Inquiry. This, and Mullan’s subsequent book, *The Dublin and Monaghan Bombings*, along with his new work, an account of how he met the legendary goalkeeper Gordon Banks, have established the 50-year-old as one of Ireland’s more influential and respected journalists. Not bad for someone who discovered he was dyslexic at the age of 38.

Up to that point Mullan’s life was tainted by the belief that he was ‘stupid’. He attended school in Derry during the 1960s, where classes were physically divided according to the intellect of pupils. Those who were ‘bright’ were seated to the teacher’s right, those who were ‘slow’ to the left. He says that as a child he quickly learned his place on the “stratosphere of intellectual giftedness”.

He describes how he felt when he discovered he was dyslexic. “The words came like a knockout punch, a part of me wanted to sit down and mourn the loss of childhood hope.” His discovery set him on a road of reflection and exploration, and he cites it

as a life-changing revelation. Mullan went back to Derry to confront one of the teachers who had insisted that he had ‘no chance’ of achieving academically. Master G had died six months before, so Don visited his grave three times as a method of coping with his anger. “It was the closest I could get to eyeballing him. I just stood and wished that I could dig the grave up and throttle him.”

Don said that in his mind he spoke to the master and told him: “I want you to know the damage that you did, and you have probably no memories of the hurt that you caused me when I was a child, but I still remember the words you said to me and they are burned into my brain.” Those words were like a tape on a loop that played in his mind throughout his whole life: “You’ve no chance, you’ve no chance, no chance...”

To Mullan, this was the emotional abuse of a child. He said that the teacher’s words wounded him more than the blows of bullies. “Now I discover I’m dyslexic and it wasn’t because I was stupid, no, not bloody stupid.”

Mullan became president of the Irish human rights organisation Afri (Action from Ireland) when he was 24, and has spent most of his life working for justice, peace and human rights around the world. In 1994, he was invited to South Africa by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to attend Nelson Mandela’s inauguration as president. In 2002, he received the ‘Defenders of Human Dignity’ award from the International League of Human Rights at UN headquarters in New York.

Mullan was born into a working class family and grew up in the infamous Creggan estate in Derry. When he was a

young boy, his childhood hero was Gordon Banks, the England goalkeeper. Mullan’s fascination with Banks helped him overcome his difficulties in reading. He wanted to know everything about Banks and began to collect every picture and article that was written about him, pasting them into a large scrapbook. He says that this was his first piece of investigative journalism, and boasts that it’s “probably one of the greatest scrapbooks in the whole world”. To this day he still treasures this piece of childhood memorabilia.

In 1970, Mullan watched Banks play for Stoke City against Finn Harps in Donegal. Before the match, his father arranged for him to meet his hero. Mullan smiles thinking of that meeting, and says it was the day “my life changed”. His self-esteem and his goalkeeping improved and, most importantly, his love of Gordon Banks crossed the religious and political divide that was beginning to take hold in Derry. This is the subject of his recent book, *Gordon Banks: A Hero Who Could Fly*. Mullan believes that his love of Banks saved him from joining the IRA after Bloody Sunday, a choice taken by so many of his peers.

When Mullan was a teenager the British Army raided his house. His family stood in their pyjamas while their home was torn apart. A soldier went into Don’s room expecting to find the 1916 Proclamation and pictures of Pádraig Pearse, but was surprised when he found Mullan’s walls adorned with England and Stoke City posters. Confused, the soldier asked: “What’s this, mate?”

“He’s my hero,” young Mullan replied, and

proceeded to show him his scrapbook. All of a sudden the raid was abandoned as the soldiers were much more interested in marvelling at the scrapbook and his hero’s autograph.

“I remember at one point sitting on our stairs holding court with five soldiers and giving them a lesson in Irish history.” He remembers asking them: “How would you feel if the shoe was on the other foot and we were the more powerful nation and we were doing to you in England what you are doing to us?” The soldiers agreed and it seems to have been a beautiful exchange during such troubled times.

Today, Mullan lives in Dublin with his wife and three children, and earns his living as a full-time writer. He finds it extraordinary that after he discovered his dyslexia, his whole life was turned around. “Now here I am since the age of 38, I have kept my family together earning money through the very thing that, as a child, I failed at: the written word,” he muses. “I have broken free of the lie. The lie being that I’m stupid.”

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