Why is history as important to us as human beings and society? Is it just about keeping a record for future generations? Or does it have a role in informing the national psyche? Every nation state needs a narrative and the story we embrace about ourselves is important for our patriotism. To give us a sense of who we are and why we are the way we are.

A mature nation should be able to look into the darkest corners of its history and confront the truth. This is a process through which we are only starting to embark in relation to the conflict in Northern Ireland. As I left Dublin yesterday, the news headline was the search for Columba McVeigh, a 19-year-old man murdered by the IRA and secretly buried in a bog in forty years ago.

In Spain, forty years on, that country is also beginning to delve into its civil war past, which for a long time was parked for the sake of political stability and reconciliation. In South Africa they had the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and this has been offered as a template for Northern Ireland. Many people however, feel it is too soon in Northern Ireland. It was a murky war on all sides. Little of it was noble. The facts don’t lie.

Of those who died, over 3600, 60% were killed by the IRA, 30% by Loyalists and 10% by official British forces or state agents. There are thousands of unsolved crimes. What is called the “Legacy of the Past” is very much an agenda item for us in Ireland. Even after twenty years of fragile and imperfect peace, the traces of the conflict on our physical social and psychological landscapes are evident today. Some feel our failure to start facing up to these issues is retarding political progress. The truth is there may never be a shared version of the past.

Whatever the process of moving on and looking back, we must allow historians to show us the fullest accounts of the past as possible. We study history not only to learn from the past, but to navigate the present and the future. This is only possible if the picture is the fullest possible, not a version that is biased or self-serving.

For too long in Ireland we airbrushed out our British past, including the sacrifice of so many thousands of Irish men who fought and died in the First War. Only now are we honouring them.

Similarly, only now are we seeing the cruelty and injustice of how society and the Church dealt with young women who had children out of marriage in the Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene laundries. Our history in this regard is shameful.
As well as learning from history, we ought not to be captive or bound by history. To quote Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in her recent visit to Ireland, we need to be able to “bow to the past but not be bound by it”.

1.

My own view is that to achieve the Good Friday Agreement, the participants, those who were negotiators had to transcend the narrative of their own respective tribes and embrace risk, hope, and a tolerance of difference which was not in evidence in their respective historical traditions.

The task facing the two governments and our talks with Chair Senator Mitchell twenty years ago was to find an accommodation between two polarised set of worldviews, two totally different sets of allegiances, and a whole heap of grievances about what each side had perpetrated on the other over decades including three decades of war.

I must admit I have not yet have time to read all the essays in The Cambridge History of Ireland, but I did read the essay by Paul and John Bew on the period of history of which I was a part, the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. Of course, they have the benefit of looking back with a cold eye after twenty years.

I also now have that benefit of hindsight, but as a former politician intimately embroiled as a Minister in those events now viewed as historical, I have a slightly different take. One thing that historians do not capture perhaps is the often random nature of those political developments which become history.

In retrospect, the narrative can look rational or planned, but often the opposite is the case and the vagaries and venalities of politics fall a long way short from the subsequent telling of it. The near misses, the false dawns, the temper tantrums of individuals, the internal rivalries, the vagaries of the personalities involved all go into the mix of what actually happened. At times of high stress, people behave erratically. Some have cooler heads. Some permanently hot and inclined to disengage. In a process involving so many diverse characters and perspectives mandates and priorities, a misplaced word in a statement could catapult the process into walkout and stalemate.

For example, we almost lost David Trimble in the final hours of the negotiations when he had sight of a rather ambitious list of North South Executive bodies drawn up by a senior official from the Taoiseach’s office. To avoid a disastrous and history-altering walkout, the list known as Wally’s list was quickly filleted down to a handful.

The learned historians here today to launch this wonderful collection, The Cambridge History of Ireland from 600 to the present, know far more about my country than I do in any great historical detail. They have done us great service by compiling these accomplished essays, which record and analyse Irish history in a very broad way. They deserve our thanks, respect, and recognition.

I am asked today to share my own experience of involvement in what is now a historical period of Irish history: The Northern Irish Peace Process and the multi-party talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.
In this twentieth anniversary year of the Agreement, I have had cause to reflect on several occasions such as this on whether the Agreement, the political settlement, could have been improved. What lessons we have learned. Has it been a success in the round? Was it a victory or a defeat for Republicans or Unionists?

2.

The answer is of course, when viewed through the prism of conflict resolution, it has been a huge success. Although it took almost ten years to finally decommission illegal weapons and the massive IRA arsenal, the war is over on our island and apart from well-monitored dissidents who still pose a security threat, the vexed quarrel over Northern Ireland as between the two islands has been essentially settled. The political arrangements and dispensation, agreed in relation to the governance of Northern Ireland is far from settled and remains unfinished business.

The power sharing arrangements, which were a key element of the Agreement, have operated sporadically and have not proven to be sustained. As of today, it is 18 months since the collapse of the Executive and the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. Disagreements which caused that collapse; a “cash for ash” scandal and a row about the Irish language and marriage equality, have now morphed into a dogged divorce-like situation as between the two main parties, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party, the DUP. Trust is in short supply, and the parties are more polarised than ever before because they are on different sides of the Brexit debate.

The DUP, being ardent Brexiteers, are supporting a weakened British Government, which makes any cooperation with Sinn Féin impossible. Sinn Féin are “remaines” and it is important to note a majority in Northern Ireland voted in referendum to remain in the EU. It is unlikely that the power sharing Executive will be restored until the Brexit withdrawal arrangements are finalised. The Irish Government is working hard to keep relationships and goodwill alive despite inevitable Brexit discord. Both Governments as custodians of the Agreement want to see the institutions re-established.

But the problem is political, not a security one. As noted in the essay by Paul Bew and John Bew, Gerry Adams, “while insisting there was a crisis of the institutions, declared that there was no crisis of the peace process.”

Brexit is another classic example of how a random and unexpected political eruption in a democracy can derail a whole plan like the Good Friday Agreement and Anglo Irish relations. Of all the things we sought to predict or plan for as two governments during the negotiations 20 years ago and since, not once had anyone imagined that the UK would vote to leave the EU, with huge implications for the arrangements established under the Good Friday Agreement.

If anything our very common membership of the EU was one of the strengths of the political settlement. A vital tenet of the Agreement when it came to the border was that while Northern Ireland was still part of the UK, until such time in the future when a majority wished otherwise in a referendum, the border was to be blurred by Cross Border bodies with
Executive powers, and there was to be a North South Ministerial Council to enhance cooperation in agreed sectors.

The fact that we were both in the EU meant that there was a porous border, with no security or immigration apparatus or customs. Essentially since the Good Friday Agreement, the border was invisible only to geographers and those charged with marking jurisdictions. People passed freely north/south, paying no heed to the border except perhaps for bureaucratic and legal purposes. The border today is free-flowing and frictionless. As the Tánaiste noted recently in a speech to the British Irish Association in Oxford, this is of critical importance to the 7,400 businesses in Northern Ireland that trade across the border supporting 167,000 jobs. Cross-border trade represents the first export market for some 73% of Northern Ireland small- and medium-sized companies. And it’s about more than trade.

3.

“This invisible border is the most tangible product of the peace process. Psychologically it has transformed the landscape and allowed identity to breathe more freely. Protecting this precious achievement, a backbone to our hard won peace is the only motivation in prioritising Northern Ireland in the Brexit negotiation.” (Simon Coveney, September, 2018)

That’s why the Irish border finds itself centre stage as we speak in the standoff between the UK and the EU as the Brexit withdrawal treaty is being negotiated. Ireland finds herself pitched against the old enemy, but this time with the ballast of remarkable support from the EU colleagues. At times they can seem more steadfast than ourselves in holding the line about the backstop guarantees to protect the Irish border and the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

And to be honest, a hard Brexit with a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic would be to my mind a breach of the Good Friday Agreement, an international Agreement as between the UK and Ireland and lodged at the United Nations. These are critical weeks in the negotiations leading to the UK withdrawal agreement. The priority has to be what will work best to preserve the peace and relative normality which has characterised these last twenty years and will help to build prosperity and reconciliation in the future.

For the hard Brexit rebels in the Tory Party, all the gains of the peace process and the GFA would appear to be like “eaten bread” and not so important any more compared to the desire to be out of the EU. Ironically, there is scant concern expressed for the majority of Northern Ireland citizens who voted to stay/remain in the European Union.

Another unforeseen but perhaps inevitable outcome twenty years on is the relative decline of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party as the peace process bedded down. The irony is that making the ultimate historic compromises in reaching the Agreement was not in those parties electoral interest.

The story of John Hume’s life’s work has been ably recorded in a recent book and film by Maurice Fitzpatrick titled John Hume in America. Few will deny that Hume was the principle architect of our precious peace. But to achieve the ultimate peace, John Hume was willing to sacrifice his own party.
Seamus Mallon, deputy leader of the SDLP saw the risks early on when the Hume/Adams dialogue started. “Adams played Hume like a 3-lb. trout”, Mallon later commented on Hume. “He was so immersed in the whole business of getting peace that he didn’t or couldn’t come to grips with the fact that his presence with them gave them, especially in the US and Ireland, a status that almost bordered on validating their actions of the past thirty years”.

4.

Sinn Féin and the DUP, the hard men of politics of Northern Ireland, did better out of the whole process than the moderate nationalists and unionists. History will be kinder to those moderate parties but politics has not been. This irony is identified well in the essay in Volume IV. “Those who expected the UUP and SDLP would be rewarded for driving the peace process would be disappointed. It was as though the people confronted by the structure of a negotiated compromise could only tolerate it if their own rhetorical “hard liners” were in control.”….. “the two greatest bullies would be best suited to govern the north of Ireland.” Seamus Mallon saw this as a betrayal by the governments. He resented the over-elevation of Sinn Féin.

But while the DUP and Sinn Féin have the electoral clout to share the spoils of power, all the evidence is they lack the temperament and ability to share power and just “get along”.

They are culturally polarised, mutually distrusting of each other. I dare say there are those in the DUP who see Brexit as an opportunity to unravel all the required “negotiated” sharing and cross border collaboration envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement.

Indeed, it has to be remembered that the DUP were not part of the negotiations twenty years ago. They were firmly outside the talks and rejectionists from the beginning. They only came on board by overcoming the UUP electorally and therefore were in pole position to rule again (Paisley as first Minister) in 2007. Up ’til then, the Executive and Assembly had only operated fitfully.

With reformed Ian Paisley and a fully democratised Martin McGuinness in control, the Executive operated well enough for several years, and I do believe personalities matter when it comes to power sharing. It is like a marriage; it takes patience, wisdom and knowing when to stay, when to sulk and when to storm out. Sadly, the two current leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin do not have good relations.

Sinn Féin as an all-Island party is not minded to go back into government with the DUP in current circumstances.

As always, their perspective is to take the long view, the strategic all-Island rather than the immediately popular course. As an all-Island party, they cannot associate themselves with the DUP who after all are propping up the Brexit, supporting Tory party government. They are more focussed on building the party electorally north and south. And like it or not, and many do not, Sinn Féin have done well in politics.

I often say Sinn Féin have brought all the stamina, zeal and commitment that fuelled a thirty years war against the British, into politics. They have grown their electoral support in the republic to 22 seats in the Dáil and are competing with the big established parties like Fianna
Fáil and Labour. They espouse populist left-wing policies which have found favour in an Ireland emerging from a catastrophic recession, mostly blamed on capitalist corruption and regulatory incompetence. Fertile ground for their outsiders style of grievance policies.

5.

The SDLP, on the other hand, who made the compromises and always promoted a belief in sharing power cross community and never espoused violence are struggling to find a place. There is even talk of a merger with Fianna Fáil. John Hume sadly is very unwell. In some ways I am glad he is not aware of the current stalemate around the Executive and on the Brexit disaster. He was such a strong European, member of the European Parliament for fifteen years. And of course his life’s work was for the two communities to share power on the basis of equality and mutual respect for difference. His voice is really missed in the Brexit debate and in the ongoing stalemate in the power sharing Executive.

In terms of Anglo Irish relations, the Brexit issue has very much impacted on the sense of partnership which was so central to firstly the achievement and more importantly the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. That sense of common purpose of the two Governments as custodians of the peace process has diminished as British politics has become more inward looking and polarised around concepts of sovereignty and a desire for independence and the Brexit motivated “taking back control”. What lies behind the anti-EU sentiment is essentially nostalgia for the old colonial pre-EU days, with a big element of opposition to migration to the UK from EU countries.

Certainly UKIP, the party which was the main sponsor and instigator of Brexit, was fuelled by this new right wing, little Englander, anti-European sentiment. The Tory party unfortunately itself divided on these issues and offered the Cameron referendum with the result of a narrow majority in favour of Brexit.

This has caused potentially the biggest rift in Anglo-Irish relations in decades. Ireland finds herself pitched firmly as a member of the EU across the table with EU negotiators and the bilateral relationship is therefore minimised. As negotiations reach finality in October for a final withdrawal treaty, Ireland is central to the negotiations by virtue of a guaranteed backstop relating to the border. Guarantees have been given by the EU and the UK in relation to the protecting the GFA and the common travel area between UK and Ireland which predates the EU membership. One can only trust that sense will prevail and an accommodation will be reached which is good for both countries and a disorderly Brexit with no deal can be avoided.

Any recent visitor to Ireland cannot but notice the change in the population in terms of diversity.

The last twenty years has seen a complete altering of the population, mostly as a result of migration from EU countries particularly Poland and the other accession countries. Poles now constitute the largest non-Irish born community in Ireland. And as the economy strengthens we now have a situation that more Irish people are now returning to live here from abroad than emigrating, for the first time in a decade.
Emigration has not stopped of course, but the post-crash mass exodus is thankfully in reverse. 2012 was the zenith in terms of emigration: a total of 83,000 left Ireland, of whom 49,700 were Irish. It was the highest gross emigration figure in more than a century.

The Irish economy after a decade of recession is now in recovery. Unemployment is now below 6% down from a high of 15% at the height of the recession.

6.

The recent papal visit has become a moment of reflection of how Ireland has changed since the last papal visit of John Paul in 1979.

Back then, Ireland was still in the grip and influence of the Catholic Church, with strong church attendance and the influence of the church were evident in highly regressive social policy.

Since then, all is changed utterly socially and economically and in terms of religious practice.

In 1979 there were 7 women in the Dáil. There are now 35.

There was little access to contraception except on prescription for married couples.

It was a criminal offence to be homosexually active.

There was no divorce, which was prohibited in the Constitution.

Abortion was outlawed and even subsequently inserted in the Constitution in 1983.

It was the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland with no sign of peace process.

That year the toll of death in Northern Ireland was 120 (mostly security forces).

A million people attended a mass in the Phoenix Park for the pope’s visit.

I am glad to see in Volume IV these themes are examined in great detail.

For myself in 1979, I was a second-year law student in Trinity College Dublin, having my eyes opened thanks to a liberal education by a host of wonderful teachers, such as Kadar Asmal, and Mary McAleese and Mary Robinson, both of whom were to become Irish Presidents.

I can honestly say that my worldview was altered by the benefit of a liberal education at Trinity College. Having been educated in the traditional Irish way in a Convent school, my head was full of the Catholic orthodoxy as it applied to social policy. Very soon with rigorous analysis of law and social policy, I began to see the need for political reform, for the separation of Church and State, and for a new politics based on individual freedoms and international human rights.

I also met for the first time Northern Ireland Protestants and Catholics, and even married one a year after graduation in 1982.
7.

So how did I go from there? I worked in a law firm for a few years, and then I had two children quickly and stayed out of the workforce for a couple of years. When I re-emerged, it was to go into politics. A chance meeting with Minister Mary Harney at an environmental conference had propelled me into local politics, and I was elected in my first attempt to the City Council.

A snap election then propelled me into national politics in a General Election of 1992. The X case threw up constitutional legal and human rights crises and caused political turmoil. A raped 14-year-old girl was legally prevented by the Attorney General from leaving the State for a termination of her pregnancy due to the Right-to-Life clause in the Constitution. For me it was a call to action. There was never a more important time for women to be elected and participate in the public discourse of such issues.

I was elected to the Dáil in 1992 and joined a group of ten Progressive Democratic (PD) deputies in Opposition for five years.

In Opposition in a small party, there is no such thing as the back benches. I was Justice and Health spokesperson and learned most of my politics on my feet. Mary Harney was the leader after Des O’Malley stood down, and she was a wonderful mentor.

Then another random act in politics which affected developments in my life and in Irish politics. The PDs had a disastrous election from ten down to four deputies.

Only salvation was that by an accident of maths our four seats made up the numbers to share government with Fianna Fáil. Partnership Government with FF/PD.

I was appointed a Minister of State in Foreign Affairs with responsibility for Overseas Development.

Phone call from Mary Harney, post ceasefire of July 1997 by the IRA: “By the way, you are doing the North”. There followed a summer of reading the background documents, Downing Street Declaration/ Framework Document, all the briefs of where the previous governments had been in the negotiations when they had been derailed by the Canary Wharf bomb. New talks were to kick off in September. I was determined I was not going to make any mistakes.

There began the long process. It was not for the faint hearted. It was torturous, disappointing, enlightening, scary, harrowing at times as murders continued, perverse, corrupting. At times constitutional politicians felt soiled by it, often having to suspend our critical faculties about the bona fides of the paramilitaries and where it might take us.

Even on the morning of Good Friday there was little optimism among the parties. Tony Blair’s classic soundbite “hand of history on my shoulder” could easily have been the boot of history up the backside.

Individuals like Mo Mowlam, Seamus Mallon, John Hume, Martin McGuinness, Gerry Adams, David Ervine, Monica McWilliams, George Mitchell, Bertie Ahern, and David Trimble made enormous contributions. We all knew how important it was to transcend ourselves and our respective fixed positions. Senator Mitchell guided us well and in the end...
called it. “I’m going back to America unless we make a decision”. In the end, the Agreement was flawed, unfinished, and half-baked. Constructive ambiguity was very much part of it. It helped to have President Clinton on the line to cajole and encourage.

8.

Small wonder we the participants did not share the euphoria of others and the world media that snowy evening on Good Friday 1998. We knew it was just a beginning. And we had yet to get a mandate North and South in Referendum.

It took almost year to negotiate, building on the work of earlier governments in both countries, but ten years to get the institutions up and running and decommissioning to be achieved.

We are still not there twenty years on. The peace is good. The politics is still work in progress.

I often think how fragile it all was. What if the Omagh bombing had happened before the Agreement?

The irony was that bomb was the biggest atrocity in terms of fatalities, and it came four months after the Agreement. It was heart breaking. Had we been sold a pup? We have had many difficult times of self-searching about the bona fides of republican’s commitment to exclusively peaceful means. It was all about the “decommissioning of the mindset” rather than the decommissioning of weapons. As politics began to work for the republicans, the mindset changed from war to politics.

It was high risk from the beginning. Should sovereign governments talk to terrorists? Was it worth the risk given we had good intelligence from trusted sources that the IRA was up for a settlement if they could achieve a peace “with justice”. The British Government began to realise they could not end this conflict by security means alone. On the republican side there was fatigue.

Trimble called it a white-knuckle ride. He was right.

The truth is the North has not yet achieved the great dream of John Hume, respect for diversity, two communities “spilling their sweat and not their blood”.

The big challenge going forward is to revisit and review that spirit of generosity and mutual respect and tolerance that allowed the Agreement to be reached twenty years ago. I believe that can be done with good will on all sides. We owe it to the many people like John Hume, and his political allies here in the United States in administrations from Carter to Clinton, including Ted Kennedy who invested so much in the peace process to keep trying to nurture the peace and promote democracy and prosperity on the island of Ireland.

The peace process was a fallible exercise and protracted. Putting weapons beyond use took too long, and the delay in doing so fatally undermined Unionist trust in republicans. We are still dealing with the legacy of distrust between the two sets of allegiances. Reconciliation and forgiveness cannot be legislated for … it just will take time.
This is described admirably in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, Volume IV, on page 47:

“Ultimately, however, the peace process is best understood as a highly choreographed, painfully slow, and precondition-laden architectural achievement built on the foundations of a previously elusive ‘sufficient consensus’, namely the acquiescence of a moderate majority from both communities in an atmosphere slightly improved by the gradual asphyxiation of those responsible for the violence.” (From John Bew, *Talking to Terrorists. Making Peace in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country*)